Do It Over by marrythemonsters

Series: How to Bear the Weight [2]
Category: Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Genre: Do-Over, Good Malfoy Family (Harry Potter), Harry Potter is a Horcrux, Hogwarts First Year, M/M, Master of Death Harry Potter, No Bashing, Rating subject to change, Sane Voldemort (Harry Potter), ScarCrux | The Piece of Voldemort's Soul in Harry Potter's Scar, Slytherin Harry Potter, Tags may be added, Time Travel, Time Travel Fix-It, and he's so happy about it you guys, because I want him to be, but he's being especially reasonable here, but i promise if i have to throw up that underage warning, but we are taking everyone seriously here, canon voldemort isn't crazy he's just evil, harry will not be eleven, i actually hate that tag, i mean they are still very much voldemort's people but they are good to harry, some characters might function narratively as antagonists
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Summary:

A depressed postwar Harry has taken Death's hand, reunited with the horcrux he mourned, and traveled into his own past.

Now he wakes up on the morning of his eleventh birthday, ready to do things differently this time. He has no grand plans, just the instinct to be close to the man whose soul he shares.

Relationships: Draco Malfoy & Harry Potter, Harry Potter & Quirinus Quirrell, Harry Potter & Severus Snape, Harry Potter/Tom Riddle | Voldemort, Harry Potter/Voldemort
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1. 1. Another Version

Author's Note:

> If you haven't read Part 1 of this series, it might help explain why Harry is the way that he is here. But I think this fic will also stand on its own as a do-over fic, if you just take as a given that Harry really didn't like living without the horcrux, to the point that he was starting to regret destroying the horcruxes and killing Voldemort.
>
> The tone of these sequel fics will probably vary a fair bit, depending on the needs of the fic. This one is a lot more lighthearted than the first part of the series. Harry is eleven again and determined to be happy. We will be a bit hand-wavy about the politics and Voldemort's relative bloodthirstiness, because this is a fixit and, like Harry, I am here to have fun.
>
> Some dialogue taken from Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. I have opted not to write out Hagrid's dialect or Quirrell's stutter. We know what they sound like. (Also I've been reminded that screen readers can have a hard time with them.)
>
> Betaed by the incomparable chaos_bear.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Brief note on chapter titles: if you're wondering why I've repeated the number, it's because the site's numbering does not show up on the downloaded epub. Fellow Kindle readers, I see you. <3

“We have come back from Jerusalem where we found not
what we sought, so do it over, give me another version.”

- “Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out,” Richard Siken

Harry wakes with daylight bright against his closed eyes. The air on his face is cold, but his body is warm under a heavy blanket that smells, not unpleasantly, of woodsmoke and dog.

It was a dream, he tells himself firmly. *I dreamed that Death appeared in my bedroom to offer me a choice. When I open my eyes I'll be at home in Grimmauld.*

There is the loud tap of a claw on glass. *I thought I put up mail wards,* Harry thinks absently.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"All right, I'm getting up."

Harry sits up, and the blanket—a coat, he sees now—falls off him. With a start, he realizes he is not in Grimmauld at all. Sunlight streams through a messy room he vaguely remembers from the tiny hut by the sea that the Dursleys fled to while trying to outrun his Hogwarts letters. And yes, there is Hagrid, asleep on the remnants of the sofa.

An owl is still tapping on one of the dirty windows with a newspaper in its beak.

Harry scrambles to his feet and nearly falls over. His balance is off. He looks down at his outstretched hands and blinks at them for a long moment. They're small and smooth. The *I must not tell lies* scar is gone.

He closes his eyes and feels for the empty place in his soul that he's gotten so used to picking at, like a wound he barely lets scab over.

It's not empty anymore.

How could he have lived sixteen years of his life without noticing it? Now that he knows the shape of its absence, the presence of the horcrux is apparent at once. There's a coiling warmth in his scar, like a snake stirring awake in the sun.

The owl taps again, insistent. Harry goes to the window and wrestles it open. He's not used to this younger body. Is this how Voldemort felt when possessing animals? Like his body was only half his?

The owl squeezes through the opening Harry has finally managed and hops over to Hagrid to drop the paper on his face. Hagrid doesn't stir. The owl starts poking at Hagrid's coat, still lying heaped on the floor where Harry left it.

"Hey, Hagrid, how much for the owl?" Harry says loudly as he bends to rummage through the coat pockets for change.

"Five knuts," Hagrid says sleepily. He's too out of it to consider that Harry shouldn't know what he's talking about.

Harry pulls out five bronze coins and tucks them into the owl's pouch. The owl hops back onto the windowsill and shimmies through the narrow opening before taking off again.

Harry takes the paper from Hagrid's chest and unrolls it. At the top, in beautiful bold type, the date reads **July 31, 1991.** "Happy birthday to me," whispers Harry, excitement swelling in his chest.

"Best be off, Harry. There's lots to do today. Got to get up to London and buy all your stuff for school," Hagrid says, levering himself to his feet with a grunt.

Harry breaks into a face-splitting grin. He's so happy he feels he could almost fly straight to London, no brooms required. Then he remembers that unassisted flight is possible, but the only wizards he knows who can do it are Snape and Voldemort, and somehow, he doesn't think they're powering it with happy thoughts like in Peter Pan.

Lost in thought, he misses whatever Hagrid has just been saying about Gringotts and Dumbledore. It doesn't matter. He remembers anyway.

"Got everything? Come on, then."

Giddy anticipation bubbles in Harry like champagne as he follows Hagrid out to the boat. Hagrid starts climbing in, but Harry looks

down at it dubiously.

“Oughtn’t we to leave it for the Dursleys?” Harry asks, thinking of them still huddled in the one bedroom upstairs.

“You telling me it wouldn’t feel good to give ‘em just a taste of their own medicine?”

“Will I have to come back to them? They’ll take it out on me.”

Hagrid frowns. "I won't let them do that to you."

Harry bites his lip. Hagrid means well, but he's naive about how much the Dursleys would listen to any wizard, not without a direct threat. Harry will have to stand up for himself. How much magic could he get away with now? Would wandless magic still trigger the Trace? Dobby’s had. But does he even have the Trace yet? Surely not, or someone would have checked up on him after the hair thing or the accidental apparition. It frustrates Harry that he’s spent seven years in this world and is still ignorant of so much of it.

“How’d you get here in the first place?” Harry asks eventually, leaving the problem of the Dursleys for later.

“Flew.”

“On what?” Harry tries to picture Hagrid on a broom and has to smother a laugh. But wait, he’s had Sirius’ old enchanted motorcycle, hasn’t he?

Hagrid sighs and climbs out of the boat. “I’m really not supposed to be doing magic.”

“I won’t tell anyone if you don’t,” Harry says with a conspiratorial grin.

Hagrid leads Harry around the back of the hut, where a huge motorcycle leans against the weatherbeaten old wall. Harry remembers it from that desperate flight from the Dursleys’ house, of course, but he’d been a lot bigger then. Now, his head doesn’t come up past the handlebars.

“Just to get to the mainland, mind you,” Hagrid is saying. “Wouldn’t do to fly this girl over London.”

Harry remembers flying Thestrals to the Ministry. No one had noticed that. Then again, invisible horses were a fair sight more subtle than this monstrosity of a bike.

“Maybe just a quick turn over the sea, then?” Harry turns pleading eyes on Hagrid.

“Oh, all right. Climb on behind me, and hold tight.”

The machine roars to life with a jerk, but it takes off smooth as a broom. Harry watches the hut and its little island grow tiny beneath them as Hagrid peels off towards the open sea. The sunlight glinting off the waves is dazzling, but Harry looks down anyway. The open expanse of it feels just like this second life he’s been given. What couldn’t he do? Where couldn’t he go?

He lets out a whoop of joy, and Hagrid’s massive back shakes with laughter. They are two wild creatures flying free. Harry hasn’t felt this alive since flying the dragon out of Gringotts, probably. There’s just something about the wind in his hair, the sky above, and the sea below—the impossibility of it.

Harry loves magic.

Eventually, Hagrid remembers his responsibilities and turns them back towards the coast. He lands easily enough and drags the motorcycle into an overgrown thicket. Harry helps him tug branches over to hide it.

“Just a short walk into town, now, and we’ll take the train into London.”

They reach the station without incident. Just like Harry remembers from the first time, everyone keeps staring at Hagrid. It’s not just his size.

“Hagrid,” Harry says, trotting to keep up. “I think we’d draw less attention if you admired all the Muggle technology a bit more quietly, you know.”

“Quite right, quite right. Sharp lad, you are, Harry. Just like your parents.”

Harry handles the tickets, and soon enough they are settling into their seats for the ride up to London. It being 7:05 on a weekday morning, the train is mostly filled with commuters, all of whom look askance at the strangely dressed giant of a man who is pulling out a set of enormous knitting needles and a heap of bright yellow fabric.

The first time Harry was eleven, he had been just as lost as Hagrid navigating Muggle London. It’s not as if the Dursleys had ever brought him here. Now, he takes the lead unconsciously, getting them onto the Underground and back up again as easily as Hagrid’s size permits.

Once they return to the street, Harry falls into step behind Hagrid again, since he has to pretend he doesn’t know where they’re going.

“This is it,” Hagrid says at last, coming to a stop outside a familiar old building. “The Leaky Cauldron.”

Harry follows Hagrid inside. Just as before, the pub’s scattered inhabitants all turn to wave at Hagrid.

Tom the barman reaches for a glass. “The usual, Hagrid?”

“Can’t, Tom, I’m on Hogwarts business.” Hagrid’s hand falls heavy on Harry’s shoulder, and Harry has to catch himself on a chair so he doesn’t fall down. He still isn’t used to this smaller body.

“Good Lord,” breathes Tom. “Is this—can this be—?”

Silence falls across the pub as the patrons come to the same realization as Tom.

“Bless my soul. Harry Potter…what an honor.”

Tom comes out from behind the bar to tearfully shake Harry’s hand. “Welcome back, Mr. Potter, welcome back.”

It’s not unlike the attention Harry had gotten after the war, with grateful citizens falling all over themselves to congratulate him for

the murder of Voldemort. It had been unbearable then, fractured as he was, and so conflicted some days as to wish he'd never killed Voldemort at all.

It's still not his favorite thing, but at least Tom's attentions aren't sending Harry into a panic. Harry keeps his head even when the pub's other customers start pressing around him, eager to shake his hand. He is no longer the lost young war veteran shamefully mourning a piece of his enemy's soul. This is a whole new life, a second chance, and Harry is whole once more, and Voldemort is—

"Professor Quirrell!" Hagrid's voice booms over the noise of the crowd.

Harry whirls around at once. He is shocked at how young Quirrell looks. At eleven, all grownups had looked more or less the same, at least until their hair went white like Dumbledore's. Now, Harry can see that Quirrell is easily the youngest professor he's ever had, younger even than Snape and Lupin, who would be in their early thirties now. It makes sense—Snape and Regulus Black and Barty Crouch, Jr. must have been among the last round of Death Eaters marked before Voldemort's long disappearance. Quirrell must have come of age after the first war ended for no one to suspect his loyalties now.

"Harry, Professor Quirrell will be one of your teachers at Hogwarts," Hagrid explains.

"Potter," stammers Quirrell as he takes Harry's hand in both of his, "can't tell you how pleased I am to meet you."

There is no pain when they touch. Has Voldemort not begun possessing Quirrell all of the time yet? Or maybe Lily's protection only kicks in when there's intent to harm Harry? It could even be Harry's own intent that's affecting things. Who knows what difference it might make that Harry has embraced his horcrux and brought it back with him willingly?

Harry finds himself reluctant to drop Quirrell's hand. Even if Voldemort isn't here right now, this is the nearest link Harry has had to him since the war ended. Since he killed him.

“What sort of magic do you teach, Professor Quirrell?” Harry hopes the breathlessness in his voice comes across as the wonder of a boy who has just discovered the world of magic, and not the desperate longing he really feels.

“Defense Against the Dark Arts,” stammers Quirrell. “Not that you need it, eh, Potter?” He laughs nervously.

“I don’t know about that, sir. I was just a baby, you know.”

A fleeting smile crosses Quirrell’s face, and he looks at Harry more closely, as if the boy has managed to be more interesting than expected. “We’ll see, Potter. You’ll be getting all your equipment, I suppose? I’ve got to pick up a new book on vampires, myself.”

The crowd doesn’t want to let Quirrell keep Harry to himself, but Harry isn’t really eleven anymore, and he knows what he wants. He ignores the hands reaching for him, leaving Hagrid to gently shove folks back.

“I say, Professor, would you want to tag along with us? It’s just that I have so many questions.” He keeps his expression all wide-eyed innocence as he looks up at Quirrell.

He has caught the man off guard. Quirrell blinks rapidly.

“Now, Harry, we mustn’t keep Professor Quirrell from his business. You’ll see him soon enough when classes start up.”

Quirrell opens his mouth—whether to agree or protest, Harry couldn’t say, but he won’t take the chance that Hagrid has successfully thwarted his spur-of-the-moment plans.

“What about lunch, then, Professor? You could go find your vampire book, and we’ll get started on the shopping. Then we could all meet back here for a bite.”

“Harry,” Hagrid begins.

“It’s alright, Hagrid,” says Quirrell. "Lunch would be lovely, Potter. We’ll meet back here…half noon, shall we say?”

Harry beams, thrilled with himself for arranging things so nicely. “Brilliant. Thank you, sir!”

Hagrid ushers Harry out of the Leaky after that and onto Diagon proper. “You didn’t have to push poor Professor Quirrell like that, Harry. You know I’m happy to answer any questions you’ve got, right?”

“He seemed glad I asked, though. Once he got over the shock of it.”

“The man was trembling! ‘Course, he’s often trembling these days.”

Harry smiles to himself, knowing how much Quirrell has to tremble about. “Is it so unusual that a new student would want to become better acquainted with one of their teachers?”

Hagrid cocks his head, thinking. “It’s not usual, no, not for Hogwarts. But I see how that might start you and the Muggleborns out half a step behind. You’ve only just found out about our world last night—stands to reason you’d be hungry for every piece of it you can get. You’d never met a wizard before me, and I’m not even a proper wizard.” This last, he says more to himself than to Harry.

They come to the wide front steps of Gringotts. It’s the first time Harry has been back to the bank since he robbed it. He hopes the goblins don’t have some sort of magical omniscience that could out him as a time traveler.

Thankfully, his worries are unfounded. Everything happens just as it had the first time, except that Harry takes twice as much money out, knowing that in a few years—less, if he’s clever about it—he’ll be Sirius’ heir, too. He also asks Hagrid if he can hold on to his vault key.

“After all, it’s mine, isn’t it? I’ll be careful, I promise. It’s just that I’ve never had anything that was my parents’ before, and…”

“Oh, alright, lad, here you go. Just keep it between us, yeah? Like the…you-know-what.” Hagrid winks at Harry, who grins back.

Once again, Hagrid is looking a little green after riding the Gringotts’ carts. He asks Harry if he minds getting his uniform himself.

“I’ll be fine, Hagrid. Go sit down and have a drink. I’ll meet you back at the Leaky when I’m done.”

“Good lad.” Hagrid ruffles Harry’s hair and wobbles off to the pub.

It’s quiet and cool in Madame Malkin’s.

“Hogwarts, dear? Got the lot here—another young man being fitted up just now, in fact.”

Harry’s eyes are drawn to the back of the shop, where a tiny Draco Malfoy is standing on a footstool for alterations. Harry can’t look away from him. He’s kind of…adorable.

“Hello,” says Malfoy as Harry climbs onto the stool beside him. “Hogwarts, too?”

“Yes,” says Harry, still in a bit of a daze.

“My father’s next door buying my books, and Mother’s up the street at the apothecary. Then I’m going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don’t see why first years can’t have their own. I think I’ll bully Father into getting me one and I’ll smuggle it in somehow.”

Harry grins. He can see, of course, how this rubbed him the wrong way at eleven, but now all he can see is a child trying to impress a new friend the only way he knows how. “That sounds brilliant, actually. I’ll do it too, if you will.”

Malfoy lights up. “Have *you* got your own broom?”

“Not yet. Maybe we can go together after we’re done here.”

“I say, Father might be more open to the idea if I sell it as keeping up with the competition. Do you play Quidditch at all?”

“I’m going to,” Harry says, thinking of all the times he’s beaten this boy to the Snitch.

“Me too. Father says it’s a crime if I’m not picked to play for my House, and I must say, I agree. Know what House you’ll be in yet?”

“I mean, no one really knows until they get there, do they?”

“True. But I know I’ll be in Slytherin, all our family have been—imagine being in Hufflepuff, I think I’d leave, wouldn’t you?”

Harry laughs. “I haven’t the diligence for Hufflepuff. Still, I wouldn’t be so quick to dismiss them. Ever met an angry badger? Vicious little buggers.”

“I suppose. I’d still rather be a snake.”

“Me too,” says Harry, finding that he means it. He’s had no time to make grand plans since waking up back in his past, but he’s followed his instincts with Quirrell and now with Malfoy, and he has a good feeling about it. After all, what would be the point of getting a second chance only to do everything the same way again?

“Where are your parents, anyway?” says Malfoy. “Maybe when they’re back, we could all get lunch. Father has been raving about this new place down by Knockturn.”

“Oh, thanks, but I already have lunch plans. I met the new Defense professor on my way into Diagon and convinced him to meet up for lunch.”

“Did you?” Malfoy actually sounds impressed. “What’s he like?”

Far more interesting than he’ll ever let on, Harry thinks. “I was surprised how young he was. He has an awful stammer—Hagrid says he met some vampires or something in Albania and hasn’t been the same since. But just think of the stories he must have.”

“Who’s Hagrid?” demands Malfoy.

“Oh, he’s the gamekeeper at Hogwarts. He’s the one who brought me today, only the Gringotts carts made him a bit ill so he went to have a drink while I got fitted here.”

“Why is he with you? Where are your parents?”

“They’re a bit dead.”

“Oh, sorry,” says Malfoy, and he does actually sound a bit sorry. “But they were *our* kind, weren’t they?”

“They were magical, if that’s what you mean.”

Malfoy looks visibly relieved, as if it had just occurred to him that he might be befriending the wrong sort of boy and he’s glad he doesn’t have to choose. It would be obnoxious if it weren’t so sad.

“I really don’t think they should let the other sort in, do you? They’re just not the same, they’ve never been brought up to know our ways.”

“Well, that’s hardly their fault, is it?” Harry says mildly. “It’s complicated. My mum was a Muggleborn.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean—there are plenty of respectable half-bloods. Even in Slytherin.”

“I’m not worried about all that. I only mean, it wasn’t my mum who was the problem, it was her family. She was a brilliant witch, by all accounts. Charms, Transfiguration—she was even Head Girl. But her sister was jealous. She hated magic and hated my mum for having it. Made it all a bit awkward when she was given the raising of me when my parents died.”

“You were raised by *Muggles?* ” cries Malfoy, indignant.

“That’s you done, my dear,” says Madame Malkin as she lifts the pinned robes from Harry’s shoulders.

“Can I order a few more sets of robes with the same measurements?” Harry asks as he follows her up to the register.

“Of course. We’ll get you all sorted.”

Harry studies the catalog she hands him. He’s never really bought himself a real wizarding wardrobe. He just got the uniform each year and dress robes as needed. Even after the war, he’d sooner wear charity shop jeans with Sirius’ old T-shirts than voluntarily put on robes. But here in the past, with his sights set on Slytherin, he figures he ought to begin as he means to go on.

Malfoy comes up behind him. “You haven’t the faintest idea what you’re doing, have you?”

Harry shakes his head ruefully.

“Here, let me help.” Malfoy takes the catalog and rattles off a series of items to Madame Malkin. He stops only to consult Harry on color, and half the time even that is overruled.

When he was younger, Harry would have seen only imperiousness and classist judgment. Now he can see that Malfoy is being helpful as best he knows how—the way he was raised.

They are bent over the catalog, heads together, when the bell above the door chimes.

“All done, Draco?”

Harry looks up to see Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy glide into the shop. He is struck again by how young they look. Elegant, straight-backed, untouched by the horrors of war. Harry has seen this man crawling wandless at Voldemort’s feet. He has heard this woman lie to protect him.

“Who is your friend, Draco?” Narcissa glances dismissively at Harry.

Draco blushes, realizing he’s committed the terrible faux pas of beginning an acquaintance without an introduction.

Harry quickly rescues him. “We were getting on so well, we forgot to introduce ourselves.” He holds his hand out to Malfoy. “I’m Harry.”

Malfoy takes Harry’s hand and shakes it firmly. “Draco Malfoy.” He drops Harry’s hand to gesture beside him. “And these are my parents, Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy.”

Lucius is eyeing Harry with a mean glint in his eye. “And you as well, Mr….it is Potter, is it not?”

“You’re Harry Potter?” Draco bursts out.

“I’m afraid so.”

“You are the very image of your father,” says Lucius.

“I wouldn’t know, sir.” Of course, Harry knows quite well, but if he wants to befriend the Malfoys—and at this point he’s reasonably certain he wants to befriend Draco, at least—it can only help him to distance himself from his parents.

“What’s all this?” Narcissa asks, gesturing to the catalog open between Harry and her son.

“We’re getting Harry a proper wardrobe.” Draco turns to glare at Harry. “I can’t believe Harry Potter was raised by *Muggles.* ”

Narcissa draws in a sharp breath.

“There has been a great deal of speculation as to your whereabouts these last ten years, Mr. Potter,” says Lucius. “What a relief to see you safe and unharmed.”

I’m sure it is, Harry thinks. “I’m glad to be back in the world where I belong, sir.”

“You should never have had to leave it in the first place, Mr. Potter.” Narcissa’s tone is gentle, more like how she speaks to Draco than she’s ever spoken to Harry before.

“I quite agree, Mrs. Malfoy.”

Madame Malkin is ready with quite an extravagant total. Harry digs the Galleons out of his bag without protest. He’s already decided this is worth it, and besides, he’s been assured the robes can be altered a bit as he grows, so it’s an investment for the next four or five years at least.

“Father, Harry wants to look at brooms. We should take him over to the shop so we can explain everything to him.”

Lucius narrows his eyes at his son. “Don’t think I don’t see what you’re doing, Draco.”

“Surely it couldn’t hurt just to *look,* sir?” Harry turns pleading eyes on Lucius.

“Go on,” Narcissa tells her husband. “I’ll meet you up at Ollivander’s.”

“Oh, very well.” Lucius heaves a sigh as if he is very put-upon, but Harry thinks he had secretly been hoping to go to the Quidditch store as well. It’s strange to see him as Lucius Malfoy, indulgent father, rather than Lucius Malfoy, Death Eater. Of course, Harry knows the two are not mutually exclusive. Even Voldemort had a human side, although he’d done his best to burn it out of himself.

Harry and Draco are drawn at once to the Nimbus 2000 in the shop window.

“It’s got to be this one, of course,” says Draco. “The Cleansweeps are perfectly serviceable as traveling brooms, but nothing beats the Nimbus for speed.”

Harry runs a finger down the shaft of the display broom. It gives a little twitch, responding to his magic.

“Oi, no touching the merchandise unless you’re prepared to purchase!” A red-faced shopkeeper comes bustling up to snatch the broom away from Harry.

Harry realizes that in Dudley’s old castoffs, he probably looks like a bit of a vagabond.

Lucius Malfoy clears his throat. “If that is how you treat a paying customer, perhaps we should take our business elsewhere. I’d be happy to refer you to the store we use in Paris, Mr. Potter.”

Harry plays along at once. “I’d appreciate that, Mr. Malfoy.”

The shopkeeper has paled abruptly. “My mistake, sir. It’s just that the letters go out and the children descend on us and—”

“You are not,” says Lucius coldly, fingering the serpentine head of his cane, “helping your case.”

The man wrings his hands. He looks like he might be about to open his mouth and make everything worse again. Harry can't help but pity him.

"We'll have two of these, then," says Harry with a nod at the neat stacks of boxed Nimbus 2000s. "As long as it isn't too much trouble."

Having made the sale after all, the man seems to recover a measure of professionalism. "No trouble at all, my good man. I say, did he call you…" The shopkeeper trails off as he looks more closely at Harry.

Harry nods, then leans in. "I'd appreciate it if you keep it discreet. The crowds, you understand."

"Oh—oh, yes, of course, Mr.—sir!" The man retrieves two long boxes from the display. "To think—in my shop!" He casts a canny eye over the crowd of shoppers. "Are you sure I can't…"

"You don't exactly seem to be hurting for business," says Draco as he adds two broom servicing kits to the shopkeeper's armful.

"Of course, I'll be happy to name your shop if anyone asks me where I got my broom," says Harry.

The man shoulders his way back to the register. "Will this be together or separate?"

"Separate," says Harry.

"Together," says Lucius at the same time.

Harry looks up at the man in shock. "I couldn't possibly. That's far too much."

"Please, I insist," says Lucius. "A birthday present, if you like."

"If you divide it by the ten years we ought to have known you, it's hardly anything at all," Draco points out.

Harry smiles, shaking his head. "I suppose that's true enough. Thank you. Very much." He ducks his head, then looks up at Draco. "No one's ever gotten me a birthday present before."

Hagrid's gift of Hedwig from his first life will always be precious to him, but he doesn't mind christening this second life a bit differently.

"Unconscionable," says Lucius, dropping the Galleons onto the counter in neat stacks of ten.

"You don't have to go back to them, do you?" asks Draco.

Harry looks away. "At least for the next month. Then I'll have the whole year at Hogwarts to figure something out for next summer."

Lucius takes the packages from the shopkeeper and shrinks them down to fit in the boys' pockets. "Just don't tell your mother," Lucius says as he leads the way out of the shop.

"Do they mistreat you?" Lucius asks Harry quietly.

What do you care, Harry thinks, but aloud he just says, "It's not so bad, usually. Only, they hate magic, and Hagrid just gave my cousin a pig's tail last night—he absolutely deserved it—so I reckon they'll be pretty cross when I get back."

Harry remembers that the Dursleys had not actually taken things out on Harry until much later. They were still frightened enough of Harry's new magical friends that they'd moved him up to Dudley's second bedroom and mostly left him alone until he'd left for Hogwarts. But Harry figures that if he can use his awful Muggles to get Lucius Malfoy's sympathy, he might as well.

Draco wears an incensed frown. "Father, mightn't Harry stay with us for the rest of the summer?"

Lucius looks down at Draco in surprise, then over to Harry. "It is quite irregular, but then again, these are quite irregular circumstances, are they not? What do you say, Mr. Potter?"

Harry hadn't even considered the possibility. He'd only meant to make common cause with the Malfoys, to plant the seeds that his own views might be more complicated than his parents' had been, because they would be useful allies to have if he wanted to be closer to Voldemort. Not that he'd given it a great deal of thought; he'd been running on instinct again.

“Do you mean I could just…leave with you?”

“You never need see them again, if you wish,” Lucius assures him.

Harry considers it. For one wild moment, he imagines a second childhood free of the Dursleys. Then, over Lucius’ shoulder, he sees Hagrid come out of the Leaky Cauldron and head towards them with a scowl on his face.

“I can’t,” Harry says miserably. “Dumbledore has the house watched. I don’t think I can afford to defy him. Not yet.”

Harry watches Lucius’ eyes darken with understanding. The man inclines his head.

“If there’s anything at all we can do,” Lucius says.

“Maybe if you just stop in and threaten them a bit,” says Harry hopefully.

Lucius and Draco both laugh. It’s a bit of a mean laugh, but Harry doesn’t mind because he’s on the inside of it for once. Lucius Malfoy would never defy his lord for Harry—not that Harry really plans to ask it—but he’d hurt some Muggles for him, and that’s something.

“Alright there, Harry?” Hagrid has reached their little group.

Lucius turns so he’s half-facing Hagrid. He has to look up at the huge man, but his expression still manages to give the impression of looking down his nose.

“Hagrid,” says Lucius coolly.

“Malfoy.” Hagrid’s voice is even less friendly, because he has no interest in the kind of social masks a fancy pureblood like Lucius falls back on.

“Hi, Hagrid!” says Harry with a wave. “Feeling better?”

“Right as rain. Nothing a pint couldn’t cure. You get what you needed?”

“Yeah, I placed my order with Madame Malkin. She says she'll send it all by post later."

Hagrid wrinkles his nose. “Just how much did you get?”

“Well, I wanted to get some other clothes besides the uniform. I’ve never had wizarding clothes before.”

Hagrid looks at the Malfoys as if this is all their fault. “I shoulda come with you,” he says, shaking his great shaggy head. “Malkin milked you for all you were worth.”

“Not at all,” Harry says. “It all worked out. I met Draco in the shop, and then we went to look at brooms together. I can’t wait to fly!”

Hagrid softens at Harry’s enthusiasm. “Ah, your dad was a great flyer, too. Star of the Gryffindor Quidditch team, he was.”

“Draco and I are going to play too! Soon as they let us.”

“Let us hope you favor different positions,” says Lucius.

Hagrid frowns. “What’ll that matter, when they’re playing for different teams? A bit of light rivalry never hurt anything.”

Lucius gives Harry the ghost of a smile. It seems Harry has been far too Slytherin today for Lucius to believe he and Draco will end up in different Houses.

“Ah yes, of course. Friendly competition should always be encouraged.” Lucius puts a hand on Draco’s shoulder. “Well, Draco, your mother will be waiting for us. Come along.” To Harry he says, “It has truly been a delight to make your acquaintance, Mr. Potter. I am sure we will meet again before too long.”

“Thank you, sir. Please pass on my regards to Mrs. Malfoy.”

Draco looks at Harry like he might want to kidnap him. The thing about Harry’s Muggles seems to have activated whatever fledgling sense of justice little eleven-year-old Draco has.

“I suppose I’ll see you on the train,” Draco says glumly.

“Save me a spot?”

Draco brightens. “Of course. You can meet my friends.”

Great, Harry thinks. “Great!” Harry says.

Lucius nods to Harry again and turns to go, tugging Draco along behind him.

“Take care, Harry,” Draco says over his shoulder, and then he’s off.

“Come on, Professor Quirrell’s got a table for us.” Hagrid takes Harry by the elbow to lead him back to the Leaky. “I wish I’d been with you, Harry. Keep you from getting mixed up with the likes of Lucius Malfoy.”

“He was perfectly nice to me,” Harry protests. He’s about to say that Lucius even bought him a Nimbus 2000, but it occurs to him that Hagrid might feel obligated to report any contraband items Harry might try to sneak into school. What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.

“I’m sure he was. Malfoy has the manners of a prince. It’s what’s on the inside I’d be worried about.”

“Why, what’s wrong with him?”

“Lucius Malfoy was one of You-Know-Who’s supporters in the first war. Afterward, he said he was under the Imperius curse—mind control, you know—and got off scot-free.”

“You don’t believe him?”

Hagrid snorts. “Not for a second. You keep your eyes and ears open, young Harry. You’re far too good for the likes of Malfoy and his boy.”

They’ve arrived back at the Leaky. Hagrid holds the door and Harry ducks into the cool, dim pub.

“There’s Professor Quirrell, there at the back.”

Harry looks where Hagrid is pointing. Quirrell is leafing through a book. There’s something different about him, but Harry can’t put his

finger on it.

As they walk towards the back of the room, Harry's scar gives a twinge.

Quirrell looks up and meets Harry's eyes. For half a second, there is no trace of the meek young professor. His eyes are sharp and cruel. Harry's scar pulses again, just shy of painful.

That's when he realizes what's different. This morning, Quirrell hadn't been wearing his turban. Now he is.

Notes for the Chapter:

> You may have noticed that I opted to send Narcissa to the apothecary instead of Ollivander's. It has never made sense to me that she'd be looking at wands without Draco when everyone knows the wand chooses the wizard.
>
> 7/29 - Thank you to Oddcat for pointing out that it's not great that Hagrid assumes the Dursleys will take things out on Harry anyway - I've edited to show that Hagrid thinks a stern warning will set them straight.

2. 2. I Take the Parts

Summary for the Chapter:

Harry and Quirrellmort go shopping in Diagon Alley.

“You see, I take the parts that I remember and stitch them back together
to make a creature that will do what I say
or love me back.”

- “Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out,” Richard Siken

Lord Voldemort’s circumstances are much improved of late. Much of the last decade had been spent haunting the forests of Albania as a wretched wraith, or inhabiting the inferior bodies of whatever creatures he could find to bend to his will. Then, a hungry young wizard had wandered into his forest, and Voldemort took his chance.

Lord Voldemort may have lost his physical charms, but his powers of persuasion remained undiminished. He preyed on the wanderer’s ambitions, promising him power and even life eternal at his side. The price was merely to offer Lord Voldemort the use of his body, and to zealously obey all that his lord might command.

This morning, Lord Voldemort is a wraith once more, but this time it is temporary, and entirely of his own choosing. He has sent forth his servant on an errand of espionage. If he is very lucky, there will also be thievery, but Lord Voldemort no longer relies on the whims of luck. He wants to follow the progress of the Philosopher’s Stone, even if he cannot yet lay hands on it.

He would have accompanied his servant, but their cohabitation strains them both, and he needs the man at his best today. He will trust to their preparation and hope that his adept’s scholarly temperament will allow him to keep a level head.

It is difficult to mark the passing of time when he is a wraith, but

even as a wraith, Lord Voldemort can tell that Quirrell has returned to him earlier than anticipated.

“My lord,” says the man, prostrating himself before the swirling shadows of his master’s spirit.

“Report, Quirinus,” comes his voice, ragged and thin like the whistle of wind through caverns of ice.

“I missed the Stone by half an hour, sir. The vault had just been emptied. I don’t know by whom. But I was in and out undetected.”

“Hmm,” he hums ominously, and Quirrell flinches at the sound of it. “Get up, Quirinus, I am not going to punish you. I expected we might need to follow the Stone to Hogwarts in the end. We have prepared for this.”

“Yes, my lord. Thank you, my lord.”

Lord Voldemort remembers how he enjoyed the extravagant abjection of his Death Eaters, how the royalty of wizarding society used to kiss his robes and weep before him. The effect is somewhat lessened now, with no bodily form, and besides, Quirrell makes a poor substitute for the Malfoys and Blacks of the world.

“There is something else, my lord.” Quirrell sounds nearly as tremulous as the character he affects in public. “I met Harry Potter in Diagon Alley.”

The shadow that is Lord Voldemort twists in on itself angrily. “Being lauded as a conquering king on the day of his birth, no doubt.”

“Yes, a bit, though he wasn’t paying the rabble much mind. And yet he seemed strangely interested in me.”

Voldemort stills. “In what way?”

“He asked me to come along for his shopping. When I hesitated, he asked me to meet for lunch.”

“You accepted, of course.”

“Of course. I wondered if you might like to accompany me.”

As a wraith, Lord Voldemort cannot smile. He misses the sharp teeth of his old body, honed by darkness and ritual into something more than merely human. But he knows that Quirrell feels the slow curling pleasure of his lord as he seeps into the man’s skin.

Yess. He now speaks directly into Quirrell’s mind, even as rudimentary eyes and lips form on the back of the man’s head.

His capabilities are limited like this. It is not a true possession, not unless he were to take over Quirrell’s body entirely, which might not be possible without killing the man, and he still has his uses, for now. Voldemort can see and hear what his host sees and hears, but only as if through a glass darkly. He can send and receive thoughts as a sort of silent speech, but he cannot exercise his Legilimency or prowl through Quirrell’s mind without possessing him utterly. Echoes of emotion leak over, but it is an imperfect bond. Their souls are too disparate.

Voldemort detests the vulnerability of this condition, but it is a necessary evil. Soon, he will have the Philosopher's Stone in his possession. He will brew the Elixir of Life and surpass even his former glories. He will kill Harry Potter—by hand, if he must—and destroy the prophecy that threatens his doom.

Until then, he must suffer the indignities of being carried along by this willing, if unworthy, servant. Quirrell wraps his head in a smothering purple turban to hide the face of his master from the unsuspecting world. Voldemort closes his eyes against the fabric, turning his attention instead to what he is able to perceive through Quirrell’s senses.

Quirrell apparates them back to Diagon Alley and makes his way to the Leaky Cauldron. As they pass Flourish and Blott's, Quirrell says in his mind, *I had mentioned to Potter this morning that I needed to purchase a book about vampires. Ought I to…*

Go, Voldemort replies. *Anything that places you far from the bank this morning is useful.*

Near the vampire section of the bookstore is a display table piled high with numerous copies of the same book, something about vampires. Quirrell takes one without looking and checks out quickly.

The Leaky Cauldron is just half a block further up the street. On his way in, Quirrell has to step aside to let Dumbledore's giant out.

"Hello there, Professor. Got to go collect Harry," says Hagrid, awkwardly sidestepping the wrong way twice before he gets himself out of Quirrell's path. "We'll be right in."

"I'll get us a table," stammers Quirrell.

Quirrell takes a smallish table towards the back of the pub. He sits against the wall so he has a view of both doors, although he pulls out the book he's just bought and pretends to be absorbed in it to disguise his observation.

Just a few minutes later, the giant ducks back into the pub, and Quirrell glances up from his book to see a scrawny boy with wild hair and castoff Muggle clothes. He's not much to look at. Voldemort can hardly believe that *this* is the creature who rent his soul from his body and consigned him to ten long years of bodiless suffering.

The boy looks up as Hagrid points out Quirrell sitting at their table. Vivid green eyes flick up to Quirrell's turban, and the boy freezes for a fraction of a second before looking away again and rubbing at his forehead. The boy and the giant wind their way through the pub to Quirrell's table.

"Hello, Professor," says the boy, taking the seat at a right angle to Quirrell. Hagrid sits on the boy's other side, across from Quirrell and with his back to the pub.

"Potter," stammers Quirrell.

"Did you find your vampire book?" the boy asks, nodding at the book lying open on the table before Quirrell.

"I was forced to settle for this instead." Quirrell slides the book over to Potter.

The boy covers his mouth with his fist as he sees the cover. *"Voyages with Vampires?"* He flips through the book, wrinkling his nose at whatever he sees. Apparently, even an eleven-year-old child recognizes absurdity when he sees it. "Are vampires really like this?" Potter asks, handing the book back.

"Not at all." Quirrell affects a dramatic sigh.

"Well, I'm glad you're our Defense teacher and not this Lockhart chap," says Potter.

Quirrell tucks the useless book back in his bag. "How was your shopping?"

"We've only done the bank and Madame Malkin's so far. While I was there getting fitted I met a boy who'll be in my year at Hogwarts. Draco Malfoy."

Voldemort's attention catches on that. This Draco must be Lucius' son.

"He helped me pick out all sorts of other things I'll need," Potter goes on, "and then his dad took us to buy—er, to look at brooms in the Quidditch shop."

Sensing his master's interest, Quirrell stammers, "A Malfoy is a good connection, I believe."

Hagrid snorts. "For a snake, maybe."

"You mean a Slytherin?" says Potter. "Draco was telling me about the Houses. He says his family have always been in Slytherin."

"Aye, that they have," says the giant. "Remember what I was telling you about ol' Lucius Malfoy? There's not a single witch or wizard who went bad who *wasn't* in Slytherin, all the way back to You-Know-Who himself."

A flash of irritation hits Voldemort. The cretin can't even get his facts straight.

Potter is frowning. "Surely not *every* Slytherin went around killing

babies and everything. Isn't it roughly a quarter of the wizarding world? You can't expect me to mistrust one in every four people I meet just because of their school colors."

Voldemort could quibble with the phrasing—he did not "go around killing babies and everything," he was responding to a prophecy that foretold his certain doom—but he finds the boy's skepticism refreshing. He would have expected Dumbledore to raise the prophecy child with a fanatical sense of his mission, and yet it seems that not only is Potter only learning of their world for the first time, he is forming his own opinions as he goes.

Hagrid heaves a great sigh. "I don't want you to have to mistrust anyone, lad. I just want you to have a bit of care when meeting new folks, is all. It's been a long time since the war ended, but no one's seen you all this time, and you never know where people's true loyalties lie."

Ah, dramatic irony. Voldemort looks forward to the moment the giant realizes he broke bread with the enemy today, leading Potter into the maw of the serpent who would devour him.

Hagrid claps his hands and gets heavily to his feet. "Now, you both tell me what you'll have, and I'll go tell Tom."

After Hagrid has left with their orders, Potter turns to Quirrell with a shy smile. It's amusing how desperate to please the boy is. "What was your House, Professor?"

"I was in Ravenclaw," stammers Quirrell.

"That's the smart one, right?"

Quirrell chuckles. "Wit and learning, that's the one. You seem to have a ready mind, Mr. Potter. Perhaps you'll go there as well."

"I sort of want to go with Draco." With a glance towards the bar, he adds, "Don't tell Hagrid."

"Even with what you've just learned about…the Dark Lord and his followers?"

“What are they going to do, kidnap me from the dormitories?”

Voldemort’s surprised amusement bubbles out of Quirrell in a laugh. “With bravery like that,” Quirrell stammers, “perhaps you’re meant for Gryffindor instead.”

Hagrid has returned with a pot of tea for the table in time to hear Quirrell’s pronouncement. “Of course, Harry’s meant for Gryffindor!” he exclaims, fishing teacups out of his filthy pockets. “Best House in the school. I’m biased, of course, as I was a lion myself. So were your parents, Harry. Lily and James were two of the finest, bravest people I ever knew.”

Voldemort sneers internally, both at the state of the teacups and at the praise of the Potters, but Quirrell manages to keep his master’s irritation from showing on his face. He casts a surreptitious cleaning charm at his own teacup before pouring the tea.

Potter catches his eye and pushes his own teacup infinitesimally nearer to Quirrell. Voldemort again feels a burst of unexpected amusement as Quirrell casts the cleaning charm on Potter’s cup. The boy pours himself a cup of tea and stirs in a disgusting amount of sugar, then lifts it in a subtle toast to Quirrell before taking his first sip.

“So I was looking at the list earlier,” Potter says, “and I thought maybe we could get a trunk after lunch? So that I have somewhere to put all the other things I get.”

“Good thinking,” says Hagrid. “Then there’s the bookstore, the apothecary, and Ollivander’s, for your wand.”

Potter’s eyes light up at that. “Oh, maybe we could start with the wand, actually?”

“Don’t see why not,” says the giant after a pause to think.

Potter bites his lip and looks over at Quirrell. “Do you want to come along, Professor? I know it must not be very exciting, a first year’s school shopping, but—”

“On the contrary,” stammers Quirrell, feeling the insistence of

Voldemort's inclination. "I find myself rather curious to see it all through your eyes, so to speak. I would be honored to accompany you."

Potter beams. "See, Hagrid? I'll be doubly supervised. You won't have to worry about any stray Slytherins or exonerated criminals getting at me now."

The boy's enthusiasm is both pathetic and delightful. If only he knew that he has just begged to spend his afternoon with no mere stray Slytherin, but the Dark Lord himself. Voldemort imagines the light leaving those bright green eyes as he comes into his final triumph. Patience, he bids himself. They will get the stone, and then they will get the boy, and the world will kneel at his feet once more.

Tom the barman—such a wretched, common name—brings out their food, and Potter and Hagrid fall upon it like barbarians. You'd think the boy had been starved, the way he eats. After a minute, Potter seems to catch himself, and his manners recover markedly. The giant, however, remains oblivious to the stew dripping down his wild beard. Fifty years have not improved him.

Voldemort considers what he has learned of Potter so far today. The boy is remarkably uninformed about the wizarding world, if the Malfoy boy was the first to tell him about the Hogwarts Houses. He hadn't known anything about vampires, although neither do many wizards, judging by the popularity of Lockhart's ridiculous book. His clothing is dreadfully Muggle. All Quirrell had known of him before today was that the boy hadn't been seen in a decade, not since the night celebrated by the worst of wizards as Voldemort's downfall.

Could Harry Potter have been raised among Muggles? Voldemort has to admit, it is an elegant solution. Few of his Death Eaters—none save Severus, perhaps—would have had the faintest idea where to start looking for the boy in the Muggle world. But it's hard to credit that Albus Dumbledore might have raised the Potter child without the requisite training to fulfill his prophesied destiny.

At his master's prompting, Quirrell asks, "Is this your first time in

Diagon Alley, Potter?"

The boy meets Quirrell's eyes with a crooked smile. He answers as if he's heard the question behind the question. "My relatives never even told me about magic. I had no idea this world existed until Hagrid tracked us down last night to make them give me my Hogwarts letter."

"But how did they explain that scar on your forehead?" Through Quirrell's eyes, Voldemort greedily drinks in the sight of the famous lightning bolt scar he'd given the boy.

"They said I got it in the car crash that killed my parents."

Hagrid lets out a noise of disgust, and Voldemort is inclined to agree with the giant for once. Even the lowest of his enemies is as far above a Muggle as a human is above a beast. The Potters had shown more promise than most, enough that he had tried to recruit them to his cause. It was a shame about the prophecy, or Voldemort might be tempted to make their boy the same offer.

"How did they explain your abilities?" presses Quirrell. "Surely you occasionally performed accidental magic?"

Potter's smile sharpens bitterly. "One time, my aunt was so fed up with my hair that she cut it all off. It was back again with a vengeance the next morning. They pretended it never happened and punished me for it anyway. Same thing when I was running from my cousin and ended up on the school roof."

"Blimey, Harry," says the giant. "You Apparated!"

"I what?"

"It's when you disappear from one place and reappear in another," Hagrid explains. "It's quite unusual for a child to do it accidentally. Some grown wizards can't even manage it."

Voldemort had, as a child. A strong wizard's magic will answer to great need, and he suspects that Potter's need had seemed great indeed to manage such a feat.

Potter's eyes are shining. "Magic is amazing."

Voldemort had felt much the same as a boy, although he'd had the sense to keep his wonder well-concealed. It was a vulnerability that Muggle-raised orphans could not easily afford. If Potter did end up following the young Malfoy to Slytherin, he would realize this soon enough.

Potter insists on paying for their lunch.

"Not on your birthday, Harry," the giant protests, but the boy won't hear it.

"I've never had the money to treat friends to anything, before. Never had friends to treat. What's the good of all that gold if I just hoard it like a dragon?"

Stupid sentimental boy. Slytherin will eat him alive.

After lunch, the three make their way down to Ollivanders. A bell announces their presence as they file inside the little shop. Voldemort has not been inside Ollivanders since 1938. It feels even smaller now, especially once the giant squeezes in, and twice as shabby. Hagrid perches on the single chair, so Quirrell conjures one of his own, sturdy and comfortable. Potter steps up to the counter, peering around at the dusty piles of boxes lining the walls.

None of them notices the old man until he speaks. "Good afternoon."

The giant jumps and Quirrell twitches, but Potter doesn't flinch. "Good afternoon, Mr. Ollivander."

"Ah yes. Yes, yes. I thought I'd be seeing you soon. Harry Potter." The man examines Potter up and down with his luminous pale eyes. Voldemort has always suspected that Ollivander has a touch of the Sight; he wonders what the wandmaker sees when he looks at Potter.

Potter's parents, apparently. Ollivander goes on about Lily Potter's willow wand and James Potter's mahogany. Voldemort has just started to tune it out when something wrests his attention back.

Ollivander is touching a spindly finger to the lightning bolt scar on Potter's forehead. Voldemort feels an irrational surge of jealousy. How does this old wandmaker get to touch *his* mark before he does?

"And that's where…" Ollivander trails off and lets his hand fall back to the counter. "I'm sorry to say I sold the wand that did it. Thirteen-and-a-half inches. Yew. Powerful wand, very powerful, and in the wrong hands…well, if I'd known what that wand was going out into the world to do…"

Voldemort feels a flash of longing for his own wand, and his own hands to hold it.

"Well, it's hardly the wand's fault, is it?" Potter says after a moment, blinking up at Ollivander. The old man laughs, and Quirrell bites away a smirk.

Ollivander sets his tape to take Potter's measurements and starts collecting boxes from the surrounding shelves and cubbies.

"Right then, Mr. Potter. Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Just take it and give it a wave."

Potter obliges. Ollivander grabs it back at once and presents another wand.

Wand after wand the boy tries. He begins hesitating before he picks them up, as if anxious that he might be the first wizard to never be chosen by a wand—how well Voldemort remembers the fear from his own trip here nearly sixty years in the past—but then he looks almost relieved each time when nothing happens. Voldemort cannot puzzle him out.

"Tricky customer, eh?" Ollivander looks delighted. "Not to worry, we'll find the perfect match for you somewhere—I wonder, now—yes, why not—unusual combination—holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple."

Once more, Potter hesitates with his hand over the box. Voldemort can see the tension in the lines of his back through his thin Muggle T-shirt. Finally, the boy moves to take the wand in hand. A shiver runs

through him. He arcs the dark wood through the air, and a stream of silver sparks bursts forth in its wake.

Hagrid is whooping and clapping. Ollivander's eyes are bright with triumph. "Yes, indeed, oh, very good. Well, well, well…how curious…how very curious…"

"What's curious, sir?" Potter says, taking his wand back before Ollivander can wrap it up.

"I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. Every single wand. It so happens that the phoenix whose tail feather is in your wand, gave another feather—just one other."

If Voldemort had a heart at present, it would be pounding. Is it—could it be—?

"It is very curious indeed that you should be destined for this wand when its brother—why, its brother gave you that scar."

Voldemort feels—he hardly knows what he feels. Resentment, that this boy's wand considers him Voldemort's equal. Wonder, that fate should see fit to bind them in this unexpected way. A proprietary sort of curiosity, too, the feeling that this boy is *his* on some fundamental level: his to kill, of course, as he always has been, but also his to decipher. Perhaps even his to win over. His to possess.

Hagrid is scowling and wringing his hands as if he wants to go up to comfort Potter. But Voldemort is watching Potter closely for his reaction, and the boy does not seem to need comfort. It is hard to tell what he is feeling. He just looks up at Ollivander, meeting that unnerving stare, and murmurs, "Did it really?"

"Yes, thirteen and a half inches," says the man. "Yew. Curious indeed how these things happen. The wand chooses the wizard, remember… I think we must expect great things from you, Mr. Potter…After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things—terrible, yes, but great."

Potter glances behind him, and finally, Voldemort gets a good look at his face. The boy flashes a smile at Hagrid, somehow sensing that his

large companion is in need of some reassurance, before his eyes dart over to Quirrell with a queer expression, like he wants to ask something but thinks better of it.

“Well, I’ve no interest in being terrible, but the rest of it doesn’t sound so bad.”

As Potter adds a leather arm holster to his purchase and hands over the Galleons, Quirrell comes up to the counter and quietly stammers, “Careful, Potter, you sound almost Slytherin.”

Hagrid groans. Potter laughs. And Voldemort cannot tear his eyes away from this strange, surprising boy.

The next few shops go quickly enough. Potter buys a trunk, a cauldron and scales, and potion ingredients from the Apothecary, with a few pointers from Quirrell. From the stationery shop, he gets a self-inking quill and a bound blank book, along with all his ordinary school things.

“Thinking of keeping a diary, Harry?” asks the giant.

Potter smiles to himself as if remembering something. “More of a planner, I think. I’m going to have a lot to keep track of.”

In Flourish and Blotts, Potter suggests that Hagrid sit down for a bit to rest. It’s a hot day, and the giant has been sweating prodigiously. “Professor Quirrell can take me around for my books, can’t you, sir?”

“Yes, of course,” stammers Quirrell.

Hagrid waves them off, and Potter starts filling a basket with first-year textbooks. The shopping baskets are made with feather-light charms, so no matter how many books he piles in, it hangs easily off his scrawny arm. Voldemort suspects they might have played a bit with expansion charms as well, although they’d surely deny it to any Ministry enforcer.

Quirrell follows Potter as he wanders into a narrow side room that contains some of the darkest books to be found in Flourish and Blotts,

which is to say, not very dark at all, from Voldemort's perspective, but dark enough to frighten a first year. Potter flips through one called *Curses and Counter-curses* with a raised brow.

"But this is all just pranks," he complains. "Hair loss and jelly-legs?"

At Voldemort's nudging, Quirrell browses until he finds a title with a bit more bite. "You might try this one, Potter," he stammers. "For informational purposes only, of course."

Potter takes it with a crooked smile. "Of course."

They browse in silence for a few more minutes. In the next aisle over, Quirrell finds Potter scowling at *The Rise and Fall of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named* .

"They can't even manage to write his name on the book?"

"No one would buy it, I'm afraid," says Quirrell. "I wanted to ask you, in the wand shop…does it bother you? Being connected to the Dark Lord like that?"

"I'm already connected to him, aren't I?" Potter gestures towards his scar, and Voldemort feels a rush of possessive agreement. "No, it doesn't bother me. No more than the rest of it. I mean, obviously I wish I'd grown up with my parents. I'm sure he wishes I hadn't…you know, whatever it was that I did. It's a weird sort of balance. Like the wands, I guess."

Voldemort cannot fathom viewing their situation with such equanimity, especially not from Potter's perspective. When he was a boy, Tom Riddle had killed the man who abandoned him to orphanhood. Had he been in Potter's place, he would have wanted the dark lord dead, too.

Potter has found something in the contents of *The Rise and Fall* that catches his eye. "Oh lord, I'm in here." He turns to the chapter and reads sourly for a minute before tossing it away in disgust. "This is all a bunch of rubbish."

"What are you looking for? If you don't mind my asking," says Quirrell.

“I suppose I just wanted to know what people are saying about it, you know? About me. I’m about to start school with all these people who’ve grown up hearing stories about me. Meanwhile I grew up with my rotten Muggles, knowing nothing of magic, thinking my parents were drunks who died in a car crash. I’m not a hero.” His eyes go distant. “I just…survived a thing.”

“An impossible thing.”

Potter snorts. “Surprised they don’t want to lock me up and study me.”

Voldemort would love nothing more than to do precisely that. He would also eviscerate anyone else who dared to attempt it. Quirrell just says, in his halting way, “That is where your popularity protects you. It would be a political nightmare to touch the Boy Who Lived.”

Potter makes a face. “Thank you very much to those poor sods in the Leaky, I guess.”

Quirrell laughs, and in his head so does Voldemort.

“I guess what I was trying to find is what the other side thinks about all of it,” Potter says quietly.

“I imagine they see you as their Lord’s destruction.”

Potter winces. “Yeah, probably. Lucius Malfoy was weirdly nice to me today, though. When he heard about my Muggles, I think he was ready to let Draco kidnap me.”

“Lucius Malfoy was under the Imperius curse, I heard,” stammers Qurirell.

Potter rolls his eyes. “Not even Hagrid believes that.”

“And yet you still wish to follow the young Malfoy into Slytherin?”

“I liked him. Bit of a git, but then, what kid isn’t?”

“You do not strike me as a…a git.”

Potter grins. “Ah, but you’re getting me on my best behavior, Professor. You should see me with my Muggles.”

“I am sure your Muggles deserve it.” Quirrell pulls another book down from a dusty top shelf, brushes it off, and hands it to Potter. “If you’re looking to understand your future housemates better, Potter, you might start here.”

“The Traditionalist Tradition in Modern Wizarding Politics: A History of the Wizengamot in the Twentieth Century,” Potter reads aloud. “This looks great. Thanks!” He adds the book to his growing basket. “I made light of it earlier, when Hagrid was saying I should be afraid of the Slytherins, but I’m not stupid. I know a lot of them will see me as the enemy. Some of them probably have family in prison because of me. I think I can win them over—I mean, convince them I’m not a threat to them—but I don’t want to go in blind.”

Voldemort recognizes in this ambition the shadow of another boy who entered the house of serpents determined to take it by storm. He finds it easy to imagine Potter drawing his housemates to his side, even disarming their families with his odd, self-effacing charm.

“You are still set on Slytherin, then?” Quirrell says.

“You heard Ollivander. I’m destined for great things,” Potter says, not seriously.

“I have no doubt you are, Potter,” says Quirrell, and if there is a bit less of the stammer this time, Potter doesn’t comment on it.

The only thing left after the bookshop is the owlery. Hagrid has announced that he wants to buy Potter his own owl as a birthday present. Potter looks pleased, but also nervous, in the same way as when he’d hesitated before each new wand in Ollivanders.

On the way to the owlery, Potter pauses outside the display window of the much larger Magical Menagerie. When Quirrell comes up beside him, Voldemort recognizes the gorgeous white snake with orange markings as an albino python.

Stupid, ugly children, hisses the snake. Voldemort can just make out the sound of it through the glass. *No one wants a snake. You'll be just the same,* she tells Potter, *even if your eyes are pretty.*

Potter blinks as if in surprise. He opens his mouth as if to say something, then shuts it again. It happens so quickly that Voldemort convinces himself he must have imagined it. Impossible as the boy may be, there is no way he understood the snake's hissing as speech.

"Hagrid, can we duck in here first?" Potter turns huge begging eyes on the giant.

"That's a real beauty, it is, but you know you can't have snakes at Hogwarts, Harry. Owls, cats, or frogs, like it says on the letter."

"Surely I wouldn't be the first student to sneak in a harmless bit of contraband," says Potter, almost as if he knows who he's talking to.

Hagrid ducks his head. "Well, no, surely not, but that doesn't mean I ought to be encouraging it. And it might be little now, but how do you propose to hide it when it's grown? You don't even know how big it gets."

Voldemort feeds Quirrell the answer to that. "It's a ball python," he stammers. "Probably just a meter or two."

"Please, Hagrid? I just want to look at her, at least."

The giant caves, as Potter seemed to know he would. "Alright, alright. I'd better not be part of it, though. If Professor Quirrell will take you in, you can 'look' at your snake."

"Do you mind, Professor?"

"Not at all, Potter."

Promising to meet Hagrid over at the owlery when they're done, Potter and Quirrell go into the Menagerie. There are a few families grouped over by the Kneazles, but no one lingers by the front windows. Potter goes right to the snake.

She lifts her head lazily and blinks lovely red eyes at the boy. *You*

again? Just here to tease me, is that it?

I'm here to take you home, darling, replies the boy in the softest hiss.

Voldemort is a swirl of wonder and rage and possessive hunger. Harry Potter is a *Parselmouth.*

You speak? The little snake rears up until she is eye to eye with Potter. *None of you have ever spoken to me before. I thought you were all too stupid.*

Potter grins. *Everyone else, maybe.*

When the shopkeeper glances in their direction, Voldemort has Quirrell erect a mild privacy spell so that no one else will discover Potter's secret.

"Potter, are you…did you just speak to that snake?"

"Is that unusual? I figured it was just a magic thing."

Unconscionable, the paucity of this boy's knowledge. Voldemort finds himself wishing that *he* might have had the raising of the boy himself. What if he had gone to the Potters' house that night not for an execution but for a kidnapping? He could have nullified the prophecy by circumventing it. He could have bound the boy in vows to ensure he would never harm his lord, then trained him up as his most devoted servant. A Parselmouth, with a wand twin to Voldemort's own.

What might Potter have become, in his hands?

But no. Voldemort could have made the boy dark, but only a childhood among cruel Muggles would have given him that beautiful thirst to prove himself. In the end, it is that which makes him most like the boy Voldemort was.

"It is nearly unheard of," stammers Quirrell at last. "It is said that only the descendants of Salazar Slytherin can speak Parseltongue, the language of snakes. The only known Parselmouth in the last fifty years…was the Dark Lord himself."

“Is that why you did that spell? So no one else would hear?”

“You noticed that, did you? Yes. The people who revere you as their savior are conditioned to see it as a dark, even evil, ability.”

Potter frowns. “That’s hardly fair to the snakes, is it? Voldemort wasn’t *their* fault.”

Voldemort feels a strange thrill at hearing the boy speak his chosen name. “Most people are dreadfully stupid.”

Potter looks back at the snake and smiles. “I think my new friend would agree.”

Quirrell cancels the spell and goes to talk to the shopkeeper. He comes back a few minutes later with a shrunken enclosure and a bag with a few baby mice in magical stasis. “My gift to you, Potter. Go on, take her out.”

The boy lights up. “Thank you, sir!” He stands on tiptoes to try to open the snake’s tank, but he’s too short. “Erm, do you think you could…”

“Of course.” Quirrell opens the clasp and nervously reaches down to pick up the snake. “Would you mind talking her through it?”

“Oh, sure!” Potter hisses, *My friend is going to help you out since I can’t reach. Will you go to him, please?*

The little snake sniffs, not terribly impressed with Quirrell—honestly, who could blame her—but she coils around his hand anyway. He lifts her out of the tank and hands her to Potter. She slithers over to the boy’s smaller hand and curls happily around his wrist.

Do you have a name, little one?

The stupid shopman called me Lemonade.

We’ll have to think of a better one for you, Potter promises, running a finger down the snake’s smooth back.

“Happy birthday, Potter,” stammers Quirrell.

The boy looks up, turning his startling green eyes on Quirrell. Voldemort can almost imagine that Potter is looking straight through Quirrell to Voldemort himself, but of course that's impossible. "Thank you, sir. I won't ever forget it."

Potter tucks the little snake into his pocket and heads out of the pet shop towards the owlery. Hagrid, it turns out, has already bought Potter his birthday present, a snowy owl whom Potter immediately names Hedwig. Voldemort almost thinks he sees tears in Potter's eyes as the boy reaches out to stroke the owl's soft white feathers, but it may have been a trick of the late afternoon light. Despite his largess about lunch, Potter no longer strikes Voldemort as particularly sentimental, with how practical he'd been about his parents' deaths and his connection with the dark lord who killed them.

Of course, Voldemort does not know that everything about Harry Potter's behavior today comes down to sentiment. There is no good reason for Harry to be so positively predisposed towards Quirrell and his master. It is not logic that drives Harry to be close to the man whose soul he shares, but longing.

Voldemort watches Potter whisper something to his new owl before she flutters into the air, wheels twice above their heads, and takes off toward the south. Hagrid hands him an empty cage and a bag of owl treats, which Potter wordlessly offers up to Quirrell for shrinking before pulling out his shrunken trunk to stash them inside.

"Well, that's you all set, Harry. I can take you back to the train station now to send you back to your folks."

"Alright, Hagrid." Potter turns to Quirrell with a look of something like reluctance. "Professor, thank you so much for everything today."

"It was my pleasure, Potter," stammers Quirrell. "I quite look forward to your Sorting."

Potter grins. "Think they're ready for me?"

Quirrell offers a rare smile of his own in return. "Not in the least."

Notes for the Chapter:

Help me name Harry's new snake! Isn't she pretty?

https://strictlyreptiles.tv/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/albino-pied-ball-python.jpg

3. 3. Put It Together

Summary for the Chapter:

Harry returns to the Dursleys.

"Dear Forgiveness, you know that recently
we have had our difficulties and there are many things
I want to ask
you…
I have told you where I'm coming from, so put it together."

- "Litany in Which Certain Things are Crossed Out," Richard Siken

Harry ends up insisting on going to King's Cross by himself, because he has no intention of actually taking the train. After bidding farewell to Hagrid (fondly) and Quirrell (reluctantly), Harry ducks back into the Leaky Cauldron. He buys a meat pie to eat as he walks, then heads back out into Muggle London.

His pockets are heavy with his shrunken purchases and a charmed pouch of Galleons. As he strides down the sidewalk, he gets a few funny looks for the baby snake wrapped around his wrist, but that just means the Muggles aren't looking at his other arm, where his beloved old holly wand is only partly hidden by the gaping sleeves of Dudley's cast-off tee.

A few blocks down from the Leaky, as he's licking the last of the pasty from his fingertips, Harry ducks down a narrow alley that suits his purposes. He draws his wand and casts a battery of privacy charms at the mouth of the alley—probably overkill, but some things became habit over that long year on the run, and Harry's never seen the point of unlearning them.

The snake raises her head to inspect Harry's wand. *What are you doing?*

Making sure we won't be disturbed.

Harry rummages in his pocket until his fingers find the long, skinny box that Lucius Malfoy had shrunk for him in the broom shop.

"Engorgio," says Harry with a tap of his wand, and suddenly the box is so unwieldy he almost drops it. Balancing one end on the rusted rung of a fire escape, Harry opens the box to reveal his gleaming new Nimbus 2000.

He extends his hand over the box, and the broom leaps into his open palm as if it were made just for him. He grins. A flick of his wand vanishes the empty box. Now he closes his eyes and concentrates on the image of his favorite sweatshirt from the long months holed up in Grimmauld. He traces his wand through the air, and when he opens his eyes, a soft gray hoodie is hovering right in front of him, with only a hint of a telltale shimmer of magic about it. It's not flawless, but he just needs it to last until he gets back to Surrey.

He only realizes his mistake once he goes to put it on: his careful visualization has reproduced the familiar garment exactly as he remembers wearing it—at nineteen. He attempts a shrinking charm, but that's always a bit finicky with clothes, and what he's left with is a shrunken torso with a pocket tight above his midriff and baggy sleeves hanging well past his fingertips. Briefly, he wishes Hermione were here to do it properly, but at least there's no Ron to laugh at him.

With a pang, Harry realizes that he'll never see *his* Ron and Hermione again. He can't quite regret the impulsiveness that brought him here, but the price might be higher than he'd realized in the moment. There's no one here in this new life who knows what Harry suffered in the old one. There's no one who suffered it with him.

A dull throb in his scar pulls Harry out of his melancholy. He shakes himself.

Okay, darling, says Harry, bringing the snake on his arm up to eye level. *Let's get you somewhere warmer for a bit.* He guides the little snake into the pocket of his hoodie, which keeps her snug against his belly. He's reminded of Andromeda wearing Teddy on her chest, wrapped in tight swaths of fabric.

Harry Disillusions himself and mounts his broom. A quick Point Me gives him the general direction to aim for, and then Harry pushes up his sleeve to holster his wand. He does a quick mental checklist: snake, wand, pockets, invisibility.

Here we go, he whispers, and kicks off into the sky above London.

The people and cars quickly grow small below him. This high in the air, the city looks more like a map spread out beneath him. There's Trafalgar Square and the museums, and beyond it, he can see the green expanse of St. James' Park, with a shiny white rectangle in the distance that he knows is Buckingham Palace. Grimmauld Place is just north of here, in Islington.

In the months after the war, Harry had often gone out flying when he couldn't sleep. He'd wrap himself in his invisibility cloak and layers of Disillusionment charms to try and outrun the aching emptiness in his chest. He never quite managed, but sometimes it helped a bit. He'd flown all through London and out past the suburbs into the sleepy countryside. He'd been east to Stonehenge and Malfoy Manor. He'd gone down to Surrey to fly over Privet Drive. Sometimes, he'd followed the Thames east to the sea, and one night, he'd made it all the way to Dover, where he'd sat on the grassy slopes over the famous white cliffs and wept. It was easy there, in a way it never was at home.

Now, Harry just follows the river south towards Big Ben, his heart easy and light as if he really were eleven years old again. It's a little disorienting to pass the empty space on the other side of the river where the London Eye will be built years later, much like it's disorienting to relearn his balance in this smaller body.

Harry lets himself fly closer to the river. He zooms over Westminster Bridge and under Lambeth Bridge, unable to resist the temptation to skim his hand through the water. Harry leaves the river when it turns, instead going south over Brixton and Streatham until he's well clear of the city.

As he flies, Harry keeps turning the events of the day over in his head. Last night, he'd gone to sleep in his drafty bedroom in Grimmauld Place, hollow and grieving. Now, he is eleven again,

whole-souled, with a chance to do things differently. And he's certainly been making some changes.

He can't quite believe that he's just spent the day shopping with Voldemort. It feels like one of his post-war dreams, something absurd and almost domestic that his brain might have cooked up to distract itself from the grief.

When Harry had walked into the Leaky and seen Quirrell there with his turban, he had finally felt present and grounded in this new past in a way he hadn't been all day. Harry's scar had throbbed in recognition, and he'd had to try hard not to give the whole game away at once. What was he going to do, cast a Muffliato and fall to his knees, saying, "Hello, I'm Harry Potter, and I'm from the future! Please don't kill me?"

No, he had no idea how Voldemort would react to him right now. He needed to take his time, try to catch Voldemort's attention and pique his curiosity without making him suspicious enough to curse first, ask questions later. For now, Harry would just be content to be near him, and hope that a better plan would reveal itself as time went on.

When Harry finally gets to Privet Drive, the Dursleys' car is in the driveway.

Every time Harry has flown down here, he's been surprised at how much smaller this place looks up close. It had loomed so large in his childhood, but now he finds that he has utterly outgrown it. Stepping back into the Dursleys' world, even just for this next month, is like squeezing into the shrunken hoodie he's wearing now.

Harry lands in the backyard as the sunset gives way to twilight. Fireflies twinkle in the dusk. He fishes his wand out of his sleeve and cancels the Disillusionment charm. He shrinks his broom again, putting it back in his pocket. His wand goes in his back jeans pocket, for easy access.

A soft hoot draws Harry's eyes to the tree above him. "Hedwig! Clever girl, you knew to wait for me."

The owl glides down to land on Harry's outstretched arm. He scratches under her chin, a sweet ache in his chest as the old grief recedes. "Are you okay out here for one more day, Hedwig? I should have my old room back by tomorrow, and then I can leave the window open for you."

She tosses her head in assent.

"Good girl." Harry tosses her back to the sky.

Now, he gives a gentle pat to the front of his hoodie. *We're back at my house, little snake,* he says. *I need you to stay hidden, okay? I don't want the Muggles trying to hurt you.*

Stay. Hide, the snake replies in a sleepy hiss.

Reminding himself that this place has no real power over him anymore, Harry squares his shoulders and walks up to the back door. He feels like such a stranger that he nearly knocks, but then he remembers that eleven-year-old Harry would be expected to let himself in. Knocking was for guests, and he was far less than that.

Harry slips into the house and follows the lights to the kitchen, where Petunia is furiously scrubbing a soup pot that reminds Harry of the pewter cauldron he'd bought today for Potions.

"Aunt Petunia?"

She jumps, dropping the pot into the sink with a clang. She whirls around, hand on her heart, fear transmuted almost instantly to anger. For the flash of a second, Harry sees a hint in her face of the lonely, jealous girl from Snape's memories, and pities her.

"You!"

"Sorry, just got back."

Petunia recovers herself and turns back to the washing up. "There's soup in the refrigerator."

"I've eaten, thanks."

“Petunia!” yells a voice from the living room. “Is that him?”

“In here, Vernon!” Petunia calls back.

Vernon stomps into the kitchen. “Some nerve you’ve got, boy, showing your face here now, after what you lot pulled last night.”

Harry doesn’t back away, but he does finger the hilt of his wand where it’s sticking out of his back pocket. “I’m not trying to make any trouble,” he says, meeting Vernon’s eyes evenly.

The man’s eyes look liable to pop out of his red face. “Not looking for trouble! Maybe you should have thought that before you let that *troll* give my son a TAIL!”

Harry is briefly entertained by the image of Vernon Dursley encountering a real troll. “Look, Hagrid shouldn’t have done that to Dudley,” Harry says, then adds under his breath, “ *Dudley* wasn’t the one who shoved a shotgun in his face.”

“What did you say to me, boy?” Vernon stalks closer until he’s looming over Harry, sour breath huffing over Harry’s face.

Harry sighs and turns away. Vernon doesn’t like being ignored; he grabs Harry’s shoulder with a meaty hand and tries to pull him roughly back towards him. But Harry has fought far worse than Vernon Dursley, and while his body might be eleven again, his instincts are still war-honed. He twists easily out of Vernon’s grasp and spins to face the much larger man with his wand in hand.

Fear contorts Vernon’s face into a parody of itself. “You—you—put that away!”

Petunia goes to step between Harry and her apoplectic husband. “You’re not allowed to do magic outside of school,” she says in a rush, not even stumbling over the “M” word as she usually would.

Harry smiles thinly. “Ah yes, the Trace on underage sorcery. Funny thing, that—it doesn’t kick in until you’ve actually been to Hogwarts. Dozens of kids who just got their first wands this year are happily practicing with no one the wiser. Why, I bet there’s a smart Muggleborn like my mum out there who’s already worked through

the entire catalog of first-year spells."

Neither Vernon nor Petunia has dared another step towards Harry. He sighs and lowers his wand. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"What do you want?" demands Vernon, eyes still darting between Harry's face and the wand in his hand.

Harry runs his other hand through his hair. "We should talk, I reckon. Sit down. I'll put the kettle on."

Warily, the Dursleys sit at the kitchen table. They move stiffly, like hostages complying at gunpoint. Well, and if they understand what a wand can do, so much the better.

As he fills the kettle, Harry asks over his shoulder, "Is Dudley okay? Does he still have the…you know?"

Vernon grunts. From the corner of his eye, Harry sees Petunia put a hand on her husband's arm.

"Not like I can just take him to hospital to get it fixed, now, is it?" grumbles Vernon.

Kettle on, Harry turns around to lean against the counter with his arms folded. "I can probably fix it, if you want me to take a look."

"You're not getting anywhere *near*—"

"Vernon. Darling." Petunia's whisper is strained.

Harry rolls his eyes. "Suit yourself. It ought to wear off on its own before too long." He tries to remember how long it had taken the first time. A few weeks? Before he'd left for Hogwarts, certainly.

Harry gets out the tea things while waiting for the water to boil. He's done this so many times as the Dursleys' little Cinderella that it's muscle memory. Only now, it was his idea, his choice, and the Dursleys are more like his guests than his masters, however unwilling they may be. Again, Harry has the sense of having outgrown this house with its petty people and their little lives. It feels good.

The kettle whistles. Harry pours three cups and makes the tea just how each of them likes it: a splash of milk for Petunia, a heap of sugar for Harry, and nothing for Vernon, who likes to pretend that he likes his tea black even though he doesn't.

Harry serves his aunt and uncle first, then grabs his own cup and joins them at the table.

“What do you want?” It’s Petunia who asks this time.

Harry looks down at his tea. “I just want to get through the next month with as little fuss as possible.” He looks up to meet Petunia’s anxious gaze. “Then I’ll go to school, and with any luck, you never have to see me again.”

Petunia’s jaw tightens. “They’ll send you back. He said you have to live with us.”

Harry huffs a bitter laugh. “Yeah, that’s why I didn’t take the invitation I got today to spend the rest of the summer at my new friend’s manor house.”

Vernon scowls. “You people have *manors?* ”

Manors and manners, Harry thinks, but otherwise he ignores Vernon. “I have all year to figure something else out,” he tells Petunia.

She presses her lips together. “He said—that Headmaster of yours—that it’s for your safety. That there’ll be a—a dark wizard after you.”

“Yeah, no offense, but I think I’ll take my chances with Voldemort.”

Vernon splutters. “Are you so ungrateful, you little freak? After everything we’ve sacrificed to raise you as our own?”

“You have *never* treated me as your own!” Harry inhales slowly, trying to calm himself down. “He was an orphan too, you know. The Dark Lord who killed my mum and dad. Terrible things can happen to kids who never know love.” His eyes dart over to Petunia. “You’re lucky that everything you did just made me that much more determined to be *nothing like you.* ”

Petunia blinks hard. “He said it was for our safety, too. If you leave… what’s to stop that lunatic from hunting us down like Lily?”

“You know,” says Harry, setting his cup down, “that might be the first time I’ve ever heard you use her name.”

“Watch how you speak to your aunt, boy,” says Vernon when Petunia flinches.

Harry glances up at Vernon impassively. “Or you’ll what? Send me to bed without supper? Lock me in the cupboard?” He twirls his wand, and Vernon jerks back in his seat at the sight. “Let’s get one thing straight,” says Harry. “I am not here because you have any sort of power over me. I could walk out that door tonight and only make things slightly more complicated for myself.”

“Then why are you here?” demands Vernon.

Harry thinks about this. Why hadn’t he gone with the Malfoys? Was it really just about keeping Dumbledore off his back? “For closure, I suppose,” he says, only realizing the truth of it as the words leave his mouth.

He looks back at Petunia. “You loved my mother, once. I know you did. Is it just that you blame me for her death?”

“I blame *her* for her death,” Petunia bursts out. “She’s the one who chose to get mixed up in all that nonsense. She’s the one who left her family for it. Far as I’m concerned, she was bloody well asking for it.”

Harry wants to rage back, to unleash all the anger of an abused child back on the heads of his abusers, but it won’t come. All he can see is the little girl who wrote Dumbledore begging to follow her sister. Petunia Dursley is not a victim. She is not even a sympathetic character. But Harry, who has learned to pity even the man who killed his parents, finds now, to his dismay, that his righteous anger has deserted him.

“Well, you should blame me instead,” Harry says after a long minute. “It’s me he was after. He only killed her because she wouldn’t stand aside and watch him kill me. We both know you’re in no danger of

that ."

Petunia scowls so hard that Harry suspects she is very much trying not to cry. "How do you know all this?"

Harry decides to go with a version of the truth. "I dream it sometimes. I always thought it was just a nightmare. But now that I know how they really died…" He drinks the last of his tea and stands. "She loved you too, you know. And if, God forbid, your positions had been reversed, she'd have raised Dudley like her own son. She wasn't better than you because she had *magic*. She was better than you because of that." The words are harsh, but his tone is gentle. He's not trying to be cruel to Petunia; he just wants to shake her until she sees the truth of things.

Petunia swipes angrily at the tears that have begun to fall despite her best efforts. "And then you'd have got your letter, and Dudley would have been alone again anyway."

Harry clears the tea things. "Maybe so. But they still wouldn't have locked him under the stairs."

Vernon is still too cowed by the wand in Harry's hand to speak, so it's Petunia who breaks the ensuing silence. "What do you want? You can have Dudley's second bedroom, and we can take another look at the chores…"

Harry shakes his head. "I only ever wanted a family. I realize now that it was never going to be you, but that was your choice. Not mine." Absently, Harry takes the first teacup and starts washing up. "I'll take the bedroom. Sort of the bare minimum, isn't it? I don't mind helping with the chores. More kids should, probably," he adds with a meaningful look towards the living room, where Dudley has fallen asleep in front of the TV.

"But I won't miss meals as punishment. In fact, you won't be punishing me at all. I do something wrong, you tell me and I'll try to fix it." Harry dries the last teacup and turns back to Petunia and Vernon. "I'm done being your little bitch."

It sounds funny to him, the grownup swear in his little-kid voice, but

the Dursleys aren't laughing.

"Fine," bites out Petunia.

"Fine," echoes Vernon.

Satisfied, Harry nods. "Okay then. I'll sleep in the cupboard one more night. I'll start cleaning out the bedroom tomorrow."

Petunia sniffs. "Suit yourself."

Harry feels drained of both anger and pity. Mostly, he's just tired. "Right, then. Night."

Petunia nods, Vernon glares, and Harry slips past them both on his way to his cupboard.

It's strange being back here again. Here, specifically, in this tiny space under the stairs. For all his feeling that he's outgrown the Dursleys, he still fits in here just fine.

The cupboard is a complicated symbol in his life. There were many times it felt like a prison. Harry can't count the number of nights he's cried himself to sleep on this little mattress. But there were also times when this felt like the only refuge from a house full of enemies.

Like many things in his life—Hogwarts, Dumbledore, Voldemort, Death—the cupboard is more than one thing at once.

Alright in there, pretty girl? Harry says to his pocket as he sits down on the makeshift bed and casts a locking charm and a Muffliato at the door.

The snake pokes her little white head out to look up at Harry. *I should ask you the same question.*

You understood them?

I've been around your kind all my life. I'm very clever.

Harry smiles. *Of course you are. How old are you?*

We do not measure such things as you do. I know when the shop man first put me by the window, there were rarely young ones your age in the street. Then, they were everywhere.

Sometime in late spring, maybe, muses Harry. *I suppose I could always write to the shop.*

The snake rolls her head in a gesture that Harry takes as a shrug. *My day of birth is unimportant. Have you given more thought to my name? I do not wish to be Lemonade forever.*

I thought maybe I'd dig out my books tomorrow and find you a good magical name. That's how I named my owl, Hedwig.

I did not see you look at any books before you named the owl.

Cheeky little thing. *That's sort of a long story.*

The snake slithers out of Harry's pocket and climbs up to drape herself over the warm skin of Harry's neck. *We have time, I think.*

Harry chuckles. It's good to have a friend in here with him this time.

As he gets ready for bed, Harry does his best to explain the strange circumstances that have brought him here to his past. Saying it aloud makes it seem even more unbelievable.

Are you going to tell anyone? asks the snake.

I suppose I'll have to tell Voldemort, eventually.

The snake's tongue flicks out. *The bad man. The one you like.*

Harry drags his hands over his face with a helpless laugh. *Yeah, the bad man who I like.*

Harry dreams that he is back in his nineteen-year-old body, empty and cold down to his bones. He is walking through the Dursleys' dark

house. No one is home. He passes bedrooms with their doors open to cluttered floors and unmade beds. Downstairs, the TV blares into an empty room. The kettle screams in the kitchen, on and on, until it finally dies off, giving way to an acrid burning smell.

The cupboard under the stairs is the first closed door he finds. It's locked from the outside. Harry throws open the latch, and the door swings slowly towards him.

A small shape huddles there in the dark, smaller than Harry was at eleven. *I must be barely more than a toddler,* he thinks. He pulls the chain to turn on the single bare bulb.

The light reveals blankets pulled over the child's head like a cloak. Harry kneels, thinking to embrace his younger self, but when he sees what's really down there, he reels back in shock.

Red eyes blaze out of a wrinkled face. *Hello, Harry,* comes the high whispered hiss of Parseltongue.

Harry wakes with a start, longing and terror pulsing through him in equal measure.

It had been too close to morning for Harry to fight his way back to sleep, so he'd grabbed some clean clothes and gone to get a shower before the Dursleys were stirring, whispering to the snake curled up in the warm dip of the mattress that he'd be back soon.

Harry turns the shower on to heat up and undresses. The conjured sweatshirt he'd slept in looks like it's on its last minutes of existence. The shrinking can't have done it any favors.

As he steps into the shower, Harry's eyes catch on his reflection in the full-length mirror on the bathroom door. He's always been skinny, but years of Quidditch had built lean muscle, and in the last few years he'd finally put on a bit of height. Seeing himself so tiny again, all knobby elbows and knees, is disconcerting.

He tries not to dwell on the smooth smallness of his prepubescent dick, or he might start to feel unmanned. It's not like he'd been using

it for much of anything, of course, but a man likes to feel like himself.

The dream haunts him. He's no stranger to dreams of Voldemort; guilt and memory had visited him often in the months after the war. But this dream had felt so real. There had been a presence to it that Harry hadn't experienced since the visions he'd get when Voldemort was still alive.

Had he just dreamed an encounter with the Voldemort he'd spent the day with in Diagon Alley? Are they already so connected?

After his shower, Harry puts the kettle on for tea and starts on breakfast for the Dursleys. Dudley comes down as Harry is flipping the bacon. Harry wonders idly if Petunia and Vernon managed to warn his cousin about antagonizing Harry.

He doesn't have to wonder long.

"Oi! What do you think you're doing, you loser freak?" Dudley comes up behind Harry, arms out for a shove.

Harry sidesteps him easily, grabbing Dudley's arm to wrench him back from the stove before he crashes into the pans.

"I'm making your breakfast, Dudley," Harry says mildly. "Watch out, it's hot."

"Get your hands off me, sissy!" Dudley lunges at Harry again.

Harry whips his wand out of his back pocket. "Levicorpus!" he yells, and magic hoists Dudley into the air by his ankle. His baggy tee bunches up under his arms, revealing his cousin's soft belly.

Dudley's shrieks bring Vernon and Petunia running to the kitchen.

"What are you doing with my son, boy?" Vernon runs up to Dudley and tries to pull him down.

"Harry…please…" Aunt Petunia's face looks even more pinched than normal.

Harry is struck suddenly by memories of the Muggle-baiting at the World Cup, of his father taunting Severus Snape. He feels like a bully.

With a sigh, Harry flicks his wand to cancel the spell. Dudley crashes onto Vernon, bringing them both to the floor.

“He nearly pushed me into the bacon,” Harry explains to Petunia. “I wasn't trying to hurt him, but I'm not just going to stand here and let him hurt me, either.”

“Duddy, dearest, come over to the living room and let's have a chat,” says Petunia, helping her son to his feet. Vernon pushes himself up with more difficulty and follows them, throwing a glare over his shoulder at Harry as he goes.

When the bacon and eggs are done, Harry takes them off the heat and covers them. The Dursleys can manage to plate their own breakfast. Harry just grabs some bacon and toast and takes it back to his cupboard. Best to give Dudley a little time to get the new rules through his thick head: don't piss off the kid with the wand.

The snake is awake when he gets back to the cupboard.

I heard screaming. Is that their offspring?

Yeah, my cousin, Dudley.

He sounds like prey.

Harry smiles wryly around a mouthful of toast. *Serves him right, for once.* Involuntarily, he remembers Dudley's terror when they'd faced the Dementors that summer before fifth year. It had humanized him to Harry, turning him into someone to protect, not just someone to be protected from.

He didn't turn out so bad in the future, Harry says eventually. *I hope that's still true this time, even though I'm not planning to be around.*

What are you going to do?

Harry shrugs and takes a bite of bacon. *I have options. I want to get my godfather out of Azkaban.* He'd told the snake about Sirius last night.

But even if I can't manage that by next summer, I could always stay with Draco in the meantime. Harry knows he won't be as worried about potentially activating Dumbledore's dark lord suspicions if he can get his invisibility cloak back first.

Perhaps the bad wizard will steal you away by then, offers the snake.

Harry flushes. *Uh, yeah, that would be…something, alright.*

It doesn't take long to start whipping the spare room into shape, not with the use of his magic. Harry Vanishes the discarded toys and Reparos a broken chair. Molly Weasley's cleaning charms make short work of the layers of dust coating every surface, although Harry opts to launder the bedding the Muggle way.

With the sheets in the washer, Harry packs up his few belongings from the cupboard and moves them up to his new room. The first thing he does once he's locked the door and put up his privacy charms is to enlarge his trunk. He leaves most of his school things packed away, but he gets out a few of the books, some parchment and quills, and everything he needs for Hedwig and the snake.

He transfigures the top of an old floor lamp into a hooked arm on which he can hang Hedwig's cage. He sets the snake tank on top of the dresser, which, after thoroughly blasting the drawers with dusting charms, he's filled with all his old Muggle clothes.

Harry opens the window so Hedwig can come in when she's ready, then sits at the desk with Bathilda Bagshot's *History of Magic*.

Let's see if we can find you a good name, darling, Harry says as the snake drapes herself over his shoulders.

Harry flips to the chapter devoted to the medieval saints who were actually wizards and witches. This is where he'd found Hedwig's name all those years ago. There she is: St. Hedwig of Silesia, the patron saint of orphans.

The entries in this chapter are organized alphabetically, not chronologically. Harry wonders what Hermione would have to say

about that. The next entry after Hedwig is St. Hildegard of Bingen. Harry skims through it.

How do you feel about Hildegard? Harry asks the snake.

She tastes the air with her tongue. *What was she like?*

Dead clever, it looks like, says Harry. *She wrote music, created new spells in her own invented language, and saw visions—maybe of the future.*

I do know the future now, thanks to you. I must be the only snake in the world who does.

Harry laughs. *So, Hildegard then?*

The snake slides down Harry's arm so she can peer at the picture in the book. *She's quite pretty, isn't she?*

Just like you, Harry says, running a finger down the snake's smooth back.

She gives a pleased hiss. *Very well. I will be your Hildegard.*

That night, Harry again dreams that he is nineteen, walking through the Dursleys' empty house. This time, he goes right to the cupboard under the stairs. He opens the door and sees the same small shape sitting under the blankets.

"Voldemort?"

"In a manner of speaking," comes the thin, high voice.

Harry isn't sure what to make of that. "Do you mind if I turn on the light?"

"Are you going to run away again?"

"No. No, I'm not going to run away." Harry tugs the chain, and yellow light fills the small space. "Erm, can I sit with you?"

"It's your dream." A thin hand sweeps out from under the blankets in

invitation.

Harry sits on the foot of the small mattress, facing the huddled Voldemort. Red eyes gleam out from under the hood of the blankets.

“Is this real?” asks Harry.

There is a rasping laugh. “Just because it is happening in your head does not mean it is not real, Harry.”

Harry stares. “Dumbledore said that to me. When I died, the first time.”

“I know. I was there.”

Awareness crashes on him like waves, horror and wonder mingled in the swell of it. “You’re the horcrux.”

“Very good, Harry.”

He can see it now, the way the little hunched shape reminds him of something between the ravaged baby he’d picked up in Kings Cross and Voldemort’s old homunculus form. The flood of Harry’s contradictory emotions only rises: guilt and shame at first, because he’d abandoned this soul shard before he saved it, and then a rush of affection so poignant and sweet he’s embarrassed by it.

It’s the guilt that he voices. “I left you there.”

“I killed your parents.”

“What does that have to do with…”

“I thought we were taking turns with tedious confessions rendered superfluous by our renewed intimacy.”

Harry blinks. “Sorry, what?”

The horcrux sighs, but the expression in those glowing red eyes is almost fond. “Do you hold it against me? That my last act before joining with you was the murder of your parents?”

“Of course not. I've had so long to come to terms with it—I'm just glad you're here now.”

“Precisely.”

Oh. Harry's breath catches at the simplicity of the absolution. “I missed you so much,” he says, his voice breaking. “Almost right away. I wish I'd known. I wish I'd known you.” A tear rolls down Harry's cheek. “Why didn't we ever meet like this before?”

“I was scarcely alive before. Even smaller and more pathetic than I am now. You saw me in the In-Between.”

“You mean…you've been with me all this time, but, like, asleep?”

“Not exactly. For nearly sixteen years, I saw and heard and felt what you did. My memories are yours, if colored by my own…particular perspective. But I could no more have spoken with you than I could have taken over your body. I am a shard of a severed soul, Harry. It is you who have given me real life.”

Overwhelmed, Harry mutters, “Least I could do, after killing you.”

“Stop that. I have always found your guilt tiresome. I will not have you direct it at me.”

“I—sorry.” Harry tugs at his hair. “Did you ever try? To talk to me, I mean? Is it just that I wouldn't listen?”

“Of course I tried. But I had no voice. The closest I came was when we were in proximity to other pieces of my soul: the Diary, the Locket…the other Voldemort.”

“Is that why my scar would hurt?” asks Harry, fascinated. “You were trying to get my attention?”

“Yours. His. Anything to exist as something more than an unwanted piece of an unwanted soul.”

The horcrux’s hand trembles faintly where it clutches the blanket. Harry can't help but grab it and clutch it tight, until the tremors subside under the press of his stronger hand.

“You're not unwanted. You're mine. You've always been mine. I just… didn't realize it.”

The horcrux's hand relaxes in Harry's. Slowly, spindly fingers turn over to grasp Harry's hand in return. “As you are mine.” It draws in a rattling breath. “Harry.”

Harry wants to sweep the little creature into his arms. He wants to weep. He wants to kneel and kiss its hands and swear his fealty. But all of that seems somehow like it's both too much and not enough, so he does nothing but sit with the horcrux hand in hand.

“What should I call you?” Harry says after a minute.

The horcrux narrows his eyes at him. “If you are angling to dredge up my Muggle name, you can forget it right now, Potter.”

“Oh, so it's Potter now, is it?” Harry says, laughing. “Don't worry, I don't think of you as Tom Riddle. But I don't know if I think of you only as Voldemort. That's *him,* you know? The other Voldemort.”

“We are both Voldemort. The only difference between us is that he now remembers ten years as a wraith, while I remember sixteen years embedded in your soul and another two rotting in limbo.”

“So, quite a lot of difference,” says Harry. “Okay. You come from both of us, right? You were part of him, and now you're part of me. What about…Harrymort?”

The horcrux glares. “No. Absolutely not.”

“Come on, it'll get confusing with more than one Voldemort.”

“He may be Voldemort, but I am *your* Voldemort.”

After the initial flush of warmth, Harry thinks, *Couldn't you both be my Voldemort?* He clears his throat. “Yeah, okay, I reckon that works.”

The horcrux smiles, thin lips baring too many teeth. His hand holds tighter to Harry's. “Very good, Harry. Very good.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you, everyone, for your name suggestions for the snake! Shoutout to Phoenixx95, whose suggestion of Silesia had me looking up St. Hedwig, which reminded me that I'd already quoted a medieval mystic in When the Weight is Gone (and claimed her as a witch!) - I couldn't resist the callback, and also I'm a sucker for alliteration, so now Harry has Hedwig and Hildegard.

7/29 - Catjar pointed out that the medieval mystic I quoted in part 1 of this series was actually Julian of Norwich. I somehow jumbled up my mystics in my head - maybe I was seduced by the alliteration. As much as I loved the callback, Hildegard seems much likelier to have been a secret with than Julian, so I've just removed the quote from Julian. Hildegard would call me very stupid, but we shall have to hope she forgives me.

4. 4. Invent the Future

Summary for the Chapter:

Let's see how Scarcrux feels about all this.

Notes for the Chapter:

I am not someone who listens to music while writing, but I thought you might be interested in hearing that the album that's sort of spiritually sponsoring the vibe of this fic (i.e. what I listen to as I walk to the coffee shop to edit every week) is Hozier's Dante-inspired Unreal Unearth.

Harry took one look at Death's options and said "Put me back in it."

“I walk through your dreams and invent the future.”

-“Litany in Which Certain Things are Crossed Out,” Richard Siken

Harry Potter’s Voldemort had been asleep for a very long time. He knows now that he had been in the blinding brightness of the In-Between for less than two years, but it had felt eternal while he was in it. The light of that place was so real it was heavy, while Voldemort had only been the shadow of a shadow. He remembers little from that long purgatory—only the suffering, and the loneliness.

Had he been more conscious there, he might have resented his Harry for abandoning him. Certainly in his rare moments of lucidity, there were flashes of anger among the great storms of longing. But he had no strength to stay aware for long, nor withstand the reality of that torturous light.

His dreams were all of Harry.

Mostly, they just relived scenes from the life they’d lived together. Voldemort didn’t remember much of those early years with the

Muggles; for much of Harry's childhood, Voldemort had been little more than a coil of misery buried within the boy's soul. He'd had no concept of himself as a person separate from Harry.

Sometimes, there had been vague impressions of his past as Voldemort—the worst had been when he saw again the Potters' execution—but it was always as if it had happened to someone else. There was a boy who had befriended a basilisk, and killed his father, and split his soul without regard for consequence. There was a man who had nearly conquered the world, or his corner of it, anyway. There was a prophecy. There was a boy.

At first, Voldemort had slept—or gestated, rather, for as Harry grew, so did the sliver of soul within him. He'd begun to feel Harry's emotions, the membrane between their souls growing more permeable over time. Voldemort was closest to consciousness in Harry's moments of acute distress. It was Voldemort whose added will had nudged the boy's fledgling instincts to Apparate away from his brutish cousin, just as Voldemort had later suffered the punishment for it along with Harry.

Long before Voldemort could recognize Harry's Muggles by name or face, he marked the rhythms of Harry's day by the familiar feelings they inspired: annoyance, resentment, abandonment, fear. Worst of all was the hope, but that had mostly been bled out of Harry by the time Voldemort had learned to see through his eyes.

Together they suffered the indignities of Harry Hunting and the terrors of Aunt Marge. Together they cooked dinners for the Dursleys, and together they huddled hungry in their cupboard when some imagined infraction cost them the privilege of sustenance. Late into those lonely nights, Voldemort would try to send his own feelings back over the barrier between their souls: anger, scorn, confidence.

You are so much more than this, he tried to say. *Someday you will be a great wizard, and you will crush them like ants beneath your boots.*

Harry never seemed to hear.

By the time Harry went to Hogwarts, Voldemort was more or less self-aware. He was again the Dark Lord who had killed Harry's

parents; what a cruel and cunning twist of Fate that he would be thus bound to the boy whose destruction he had sought. What a fitting punishment that in this infant prison, he would learn to rue the impetuous violence that had condemned him to a second orphanhood.

What an unlikely miracle that his prophesied enemy would be the first creature Lord Voldemort had ever loved.

It was not until the spring of Harry's first year at Hogwarts that Voldemort discerned the truth of what he was. As far as he had known, his rebounded killing curse had destroyed his body and bound his soul to Harry's. He never wondered what the other Voldemort might be up to, because it had never occurred to him that there might *be* any Voldemort other than him.

He had noticed, of course, that there was a strange pull toward Quirrell. He grew restless when they were near the stammering professor, trying to discover what felt so strange and familiar about the man. Voldemort knew his agitation brought Harry pain, but he couldn't help his need to know.

His working theory for much of the year was that Quirrell had somehow come into the possession of one of his horcruxes, maybe the Ring or the Locket—impossible as either would be. It wasn't until the night with the unicorn, when they met the wraith in the forest, that Voldemort realized the truth: he was no longer the man who had split his soul, but merely a discarded piece of him.

Desperately, the horcrux Voldemort tried to get through to Harry—whether to warn him off his other self or deliver the boy into his hands, he couldn't have said, for he knew that once the other Voldemort had realized what the boy was, he would never kill him—but Harry's mind was closed to him. When at last they faced Quirrell and his master in the final chamber of Dumbledore's little obstacle course, Harry's Voldemort tried reaching out to the main part of his soul. If Harry would not hear him, perhaps he'd have better luck with himself.

Stop! Listen! He cried with all his might. *The boy is mine, and I am yours!* But that door, too, was closed.

In the end, the horcrux added his own possessive rage to the protections already upon Harry, and together they burned away the threat.

After, when Dumbledore told Harry that he was too young to know why Voldemort had come after him all those years ago, the horcrux wished again for a voice. *He* would tell his Harry the truth, even if Harry hated him for it. Ignorance was no protection.

But it would be a long time before Harry discovered the truth, and it would not come from Voldemort when he did.

For years, the horcrux watched over Harry. When he failed to communicate with the Diary, he at least kept the other horcrux from gaining a foothold in Harry's soul the way it had with the Weasley girl.

He'd been little help with the Dementors the following year, being a creature of darkness himself. He couldn't even manage to communicate to Harry that Sirius Black had never been one of his. But the horcrux liked to think that his absolute confidence in Harry helped give the boy the certainty to cast that last impossible Patronus.

When the dreams began that summer, the horcrux had tried again to reach out to the other Voldemort, but he was mute and powerless as ever. He was powerless, too, to protect Harry, who faced dragons and Grindylows and Voldemort himself with little help from the horcrux who watched every moment. Thankfully, Harry hadn't needed his help to throw off the Imperius curse or outfly a dragon. He hadn't even needed him in the graveyard, although the horcrux had again tried desperately to get the attention of either his old host or his new one, to no avail.

The world was so cruel to his Harry after that. Often, the horcrux wished he could raze the Ministry to ashes or flay their enemies' skin from their bones. He endured those wretched sessions with the pink pretender by imagining ever more creative retributions that he would visit on her for Harry's sake.

When Severus tormented Harry in Occlumency lessons, the horcrux

was helpless to protect Harry as he longed to. He shared the boy's soul, not his mind. Besides, he spent those sessions making himself as small as possible lest Severus discover the secret of his existence. He hated to think what Dumbledore might do to his Harry if he suspected the boy might harbor a piece of Voldemort in his soul.

It turned out that Dumbledore hadn't needed to force Harry into martyrdom. The other Voldemort had made such a bloodthirsty nuisance of himself that Harry was willing to do anything at all to defeat him. All year, the horcrux had watched helplessly as Harry had hunted down the other soul pieces and destroyed them. He wondered that Harry could not feel the death of each one as he could.

So many times, the horcrux had imagined the moment when Harry finally learned of his existence. In the most indulgent fantasies, the boy's reaction was of epiphany: *ah, at last, I understand—I see that you have been watching over me all my life, like a terrible angel charged to defend me.* More often, the imagined Harry would feel angry and violated, railing against the voice in his head with all that beautiful wrath of his.

The horcrux had never imagined being unable to talk back, but when Severus' memories revealed the truth to Harry, the horcrux was as helpless as he'd ever been. No matter how much he begged— *You don't have to die, my Harry, we'll find another way to destroy him*— the wall remained impenetrable.

In the end, Harry's Voldemort did the only thing he had ever been able to do, and sent whatever emotions he could to the beautiful soul that surrounded him. His Harry was frightened as he walked down to his death, so the horcrux sent him courage. His Harry was sad for his friends, so the horcrux sent him comfort. His Harry's hands were shaking, so the horcrux sent him strength.

In the end, it was not only the shades of his loved ones who upheld Harry in the forest, but the horcrux whose very existence had made Harry decide he needed to die. It grieved the horcrux immeasurably that he could not even tell Harry how he loved him, how proud he was to have known him, how changed he was after sixteen years bound to such a bright soul.

Perhaps, if there was an afterlife, as the golden spirits called by the Resurrection Stone seemed to suggest, he and his Harry might be together there.

When Voldemort's killing curse sent Harry and the horcrux to the In-Between, it was the first time their souls had been separated in over sixteen years. The pain of the horcrux's flayed skin was nothing to the pain of that loss. He whimpered for Harry to come and save him, but Dumbledore told Harry, *Some things are beyond saving,* and then he was gone.

He felt the despair would kill him for good. He started to wish it would. What was the point of continued existence when it was nothing but this miserable void?

The loneliness was excruciating. After Harry had left him, so did Dumbledore, without sparing him even a second glance. The architecture began to disappear, leaving only the white light, so harsh it felt like fire on his wounded skin.

The horcrux fell in and out of fitful sleep. Sometimes he dreamed that he had gotten through to Harry early enough to find them a different path. He'd be just a little louder or more clever and manage to get his boy's attention. *I'm here,* he'd say. *I won't let anything happen to you. Let me take care of you. Let me love you.*

Sometimes, he even dreamed of Harry as he might be now, alive but alone, with a terrible emptiness in his soul. Harry would turn the Resurrection Stone three times in his hands, and the horcrux would feel the faintest tug, but he was powerless to answer. He had even less voice now than he had when he had belonged to Harry.

Some of the dreams felt more like his waking misery. Twice, Harry appeared amidst all that white mist and piercing light, the only real and solid thing in all the world. The first time, Harry tried to reach for him, but his hands went straight through him.

The second time, the horcrux heard Dumbledore's voice saying again, *Some things are beyond help,* but this time Harry climbed under the

bench to curl up with him, their mirrored fetal positions making an ouroboros of agony.

The horcrux knew these dreams were only the wishful thinking of his tormented subconscious. His Harry had never wanted him. Why would he start now?

Then came the miracle: Harry had come back. He had come back for *him.* His Harry had taken him into his arms, and even the pain of that friction on ruined flesh had been an unmitigated delight.

Harry had wrapped him in soothing silk and murmured apologies into his head. He had pressed him against his breast and promised never to leave him again. There was someone else there with them, something ancient and terrifying, but the horcrux paid it no mind, because Harry had returned.

The most marvelous thing was that when Harry had taken him back into himself, the horcrux could feel his joy.

Harry's attention is a heady thing. Almost as soon as they awake in the hut by the sea, Harry feels for the space in his soul, only to find it full again. The horcrux luxuriates in Harry's relief and wonder, and sends the same feelings back. *Home, safe, whole,* thrums their shared soul.

The horcrux has never held any great love for Hagrid, but he delights in Harry's affection for him. He relishes the thrill of their joyride on Hagrid's flying motorbike. It's been so long since his Harry was this uncomplicatedly happy. He revels in Harry's mounting excitement at their second first day in Diagon Alley.

The world seems crisper and nearer than it ever has before. There is no film between Harry's senses and his perception of them, just as there is now no wall between their souls. Encouraged by this new closeness, the horcrux tries speaking to Harry's mind. Harry does not seem to hear the words, which the horcrux attempts in both English and Parseltongue, but each time he pauses and turns his attention inward, as if listening. The horcrux feels certain that they have only

to learn the skill of it before they will be speaking as old friends.

When Harry sees Quirrell, the horcrux is surprised by the force of the pull Harry feels towards him, even without the other Voldemort's presence. The horcrux nudges Harry to go after what he wants, and his clever, brave boy wrangles a lunch date with the trembling man.

When Harry sees the young Malfoy in Madame Malkins, the horcrux knows he is remembering years of rivalry, blood in a bathroom, and Fiendfyre licking at their heels. The boys have always had a complicated relationship, but they have always been *something* to each other, so the horcrux is only a little surprised when Harry's feelings tip over into something like nostalgic fondness. He is not surprised at all when Harry manages to transmute Lucius Malfoy's initial scorn into curiosity and even respect in the space of forty minutes. His Harry is savvy and charming, a consummate Slytherin without even trying, and Lucius would have to be even more of a fool than he is not to notice it.

Quirrell has returned for lunch, and he is not alone. The horcrux shivers with the other Voldemort's proximity. He knows Harry can feel his stirring as a tightness in his scar; the boy rubs at his forehead, sending back an annoyed, *Do you mind?*

The horcrux forces himself to settle, and Harry's gratitude rolls over him.

The entire afternoon is surreal. Harry is a ball of nerves and buzzing elation, the great longing and grief of the last two years finally sated with the nearness of not just one Voldemort but two. The horcrux pretends to grumble about this, sending Harry thoughts like, *You don't need any Voldemort but me, dear one,* but in truth, he really doesn't mind. He spent so long wishing for Harry's attention and acceptance that now that he has it, he can't resent that it falls on his less worthy self as well. If Harry were less generous and kind, the horcrux knows he would still be in Limbo. He can hardly fault that same generosity for its breadth when he has benefited so dearly from it.

Like Harry, the horcrux is left guessing at the other Voldemort's reactions as they talk. The live-wire connection he remembers from

the time before is so muted as to be almost dead, with his other self stuck as a wraith half-possessing his servant's body. It is Harry's reactions that he feels as if they were his own. Sometimes, maybe, they are his own—it is difficult to tell where Harry ends and he begins. They both want the same thing: closeness, wholeness.

The horcrux can well imagine, though, what the other Voldemort is thinking when Ollivander explains about Harry's wand, or when Harry speaks to the lovely snake at the Menagerie. For is he not also Voldemort? He knows how his own soul sings to be reminded of how thoroughly Harry is his. Even the other Voldemort, shrouded in darkness as he is, cannot help but be stirred by the twin feathers of their wands or the language they share.

As Harry flies home, the horcrux rejoices that he was not consigned to darkness when his soul splintered in Godric's Hollow, but that he spent sixteen years bathed in Harry's marvelous light. Harry's light is not like the harsh light of the In-Between that scorched his flesh. Harry's light is soft and warm and living. It changed him even when he hated it, and now it has even made room for his own shadows to nestle among it. Now, he can feel himself growing again, like a seed taking root after long lying dormant.

He calls Harry to him in their dreams that night. He doesn't mean to frighten the boy, but he is so overwhelmed to be near him at last that he does not speak up in time to warn Harry or explain who he is. Harry, whose mind has been on the other Voldemort all day, draws the wrong conclusion and panics, disappearing into the morning.

The next night more than makes up for it. To look his Harry in the eyes—to see and be seen—is his oldest dream, one the horcrux had long since given up on, yet here they are sharing it together. To be offered forgiveness, and grant it too; to hold and be held; to be accepted and not rejected, as he had always feared. As he once had been.

It is a balm for the ravaged soul.

The next morning, the horcrux tries again to speak to Harry. No

words get through, not yet, but he feels Harry's attention turn towards him, feelings of awe and shy happiness flowing through their bond. The horcrux sends his own possessive joy back to Harry.

Again, Harry makes breakfast for the undeserving Muggles. They leave him alone this time, not daring to come into the kitchen until he's plated their food and taken his own upstairs. The horcrux is disgruntled that Harry feels the need to defer to them at all. Wouldn't they both be far happier with the Malfoys? But Harry doesn't mind doing a few chores in exchange for four weeks of relative autonomy, now that he's set the Dursleys straight.

Harry does decide to write Draco a letter. The horcrux wonders if it was his thought that suggested it.

Dear Draco,

I'm back with the Muggles for just a few more weeks. Don't worry, I put the fear of Merlin in them straightaway. Isn't it lucky the Trace still registers anything I do this summer as accidental magic?

Have you used your new broom yet? I used mine to fly back to Surrey, it was brilliant! (It's alright, I was Disillusioned, but still, please don't tell your dad.)

After we parted the other day, I had lunch with Hagrid and Professor Quirrell, and then they took me to get the rest of my things. I'll have to tell you later about what an ordeal it was finding a wand that would have me. I fell in love with a little snake in the window of the Magical Menagerie, and Professor Quirrell bought her for me! Looks like I'll be sneaking more than just a broom into school next month.

Hagrid bought me a gorgeous snowy owl, too, so now I've had three birthday presents all in one day. I'm still wrapping my head around it all. Thank you again for the broom, and for all your help with the clothes, and for not minding how clueless I am about—well, everything. Professor Quirrell found me some books at Flourish and Blotts that should help me get a better idea of how this world works. I know I'll have you to help me, but I don't want to go into this blind.

Yours,

Harry

p.s. The owl's name is Hedwig. She'll wait for a reply, if you like.

The horcrux is proud of Harry for cultivating his new relationships. He can tell Harry feels like he is being disingenuous, trying to sound like he's a relatively normal eleven-year-old boy, but he tries to send through the bond the sense that this is an investment in future relations that could be more authentic as time goes on. If Harry is so determined to find a way to work with the other Voldemort, the Malfoys will be part of their lives for a long time to come.

After lunch, Harry writes another letter, although he can't send it until the owl returns the next day.

Dear Professor Quirrell,

Thank you again for shopping with me the other day. I've started on the books you suggested. They're very helpful. I hate to think I might have come into this world without any preparation at all.

I thought you might like to know that I've named the snake. Did you know the shopman was calling her Lemonade? She was so offended! I found a much more suitable name in my History of Magic *book: Hildegard, after Hildegard of Bingen, who it's said could see the future. I hadn't realized that was a real branch of magic until reading this book—it seems awfully imprecise, doesn't it? Surely the future is always changing due to the choices we make?*

Still, it felt like a good omen. I hope Hildegard sees good things in my future.

The book says Hildegard of Bingen invented spells in her own made-up language. My Hildegard says maybe it was Parseltongue. She's grown quite proud of her namesake.

Thank you again for everything. I look forward to seeing you again when school starts up.

Unsure whether “sincerely” would sound too insincere or “yours” too intimate, Harry simply signs his full name with a flourish. He’ll have to work on his penmanship if he wants to avoid embarrassing himself in Slytherin, he thinks. Then he remembers Crabbe and Goyle and decides he’s not at much risk of embarrassing himself academically, even if he’ll never be at Tom Riddle’s level of constant improvement. The horcrux tries to tell Harry he doesn't have to be Tom Riddle, only himself.

When Harry sleeps, the horcrux feels more like himself, a distinct person rather than a mere extension of Harry. It can be easy to forget, during the day, that they are two separate souls. It’s even more confusing now, after the return; blissful as it is to feel the embrace of Harry’s acceptance, it blurs the boundaries between their two selves. The horcrux—Voldemort, he reminds himself, whatever his other self might say—spends his days seeing and tasting through Harry’s senses, drinking Harry’s emotions, and even peeking in on his thoughts, now. Sometimes he must consciously remind himself that he is not Harry.

Harry finds him again on the third night, coming straight to the cupboard almost as soon as he falls asleep.

“Hello again,” says Harry, stepping into the cupboard with a hesitant smile. “Shall I get the light?”

“If you like.”

The light clicks on, and Voldemort takes a moment to savor the sight of his Harry. It is not the boy’s face he wears now, but the sharper, steadier face of the man Harry had grown into before coming back in time. Voldemort regrets not being there to witness the last years of it—how he would have loved to see Harry come into his own! But he is here now, and he is wanted as he never had been before. It is better this way.

“Harry,” says Voldemort at last, his whisper caressing the precious syllables.

His Harry must have some sense of the yearning that Voldemort

hasn't voiced, for he blushes beautifully as he kneels beside him on the mattress. "Erm, hi. How was your day?"

"Much the same as yours, I imagine."

"Yeah? I didn't do much. Made breakfast and supper, wrote a few letters, read some of my new books."

"I know. I was there."

Harry looks surprised. "Can you see everything I do, then?"

"When I attend to it." He is always attending to it, now.

"Even, like, taking a piss?"

"I am not sure why that troubles you. We have shared a body nearly all your life."

"Yeah, but you weren't quite this, you know, *with* it, before."

"Not at first. But I assure you, by the time you first went to Hogwarts, I was experiencing your life more or less as you were. Just because I could not speak to you did not mean I had no awareness."

Harry rubs the back of his head in that endearingly nervous manner of his. "I like that you're always with me, don't get me wrong. I missed you so much that a total lack of privacy is a small price to pay for having you back."

Voldemort frowns despite the glow of pleasure that Harry's affirmation gives him. "I do not want to cause you distress. If at any time you require privacy, simply send the feeling through our connection, and I will subside."

"You can do that?"

"Of course. I did it often in our first life. When your surroundings failed to hold my interest."

Harry raises a brow. "Oh yeah? And what was it that had you so bored you'd fall asleep? History of magic?"

“Quidditch.”

Voldemort enjoys Harry’s outraged gasp. It’s not really true; Harry’s unbridled joy while flying had been too delicious to withdraw from. The endless conversations about the game were another story.

“I’ve just got you back, so I’m not going to start a fight over Quidditch tonight. I might not hold back next time.” Harry is grinning. Voldemort has never seen him so happy. He wants to take that smile between his hands and brand it onto his own heart.

“You may pick whatever fights you please, my dear. To speak with you at all is an ineffable privilege.”

Harry practically melts at that. His shoulders drop, his cheeks flush, and his body sways closer to Voldemort. “Yeah?”

Voldemort realizes there is no reason he need restrain himself here. He places a twisted hand on either side of Harry’s face. Oh, his Harry’s skin is so soft, he could weep for love of it. He cannot help but brush a thumb over Harry’s jutting lip. A full-body shudder rolls through Harry, and Voldemort feels it echo in the trembling of his hands.

Voldemort knows that he is but a small and shriveled thing right now, even if he is slightly less small and shriveled than he was in the In-Between. There is no loveliness in him to offer his lovely Harry. But he cannot help the wanting.

Harry reaches up his hands to cover Voldemort’s and gently pulls them from his cheeks. Voldemort bows his head and tries not to be disappointed. He knows, he *knows*—

But then Harry leans in, not away, and places a kiss on the crown of Voldemort’s bowed head. It is gentle and brief, but not so brief it could be an accident.

Voldemort does weep, now. He feels like a knight kneeling before his courtly love or a supplicant before his god. Harry’s love has always been the best and brightest thing in his world, even when it was directed at everyone but him. To sit under the full force of it now is

overwhelming.

Harry sits up again, but draws Voldemort closer with a careful arm around his back. “Is this okay?” he murmurs, gathering Voldemort’s crippled form into his arms.

Voldemort’s only response is to huddle against Harry’s breast as he had in the In-Between, like a babe reborn.

“I’ve got you,” Harry says. “Whatever else comes, it’s you and me. I swear it.”

Voldemort falls asleep to the rhythm of Harry’s heartbeat.

Notes for the Chapter:

> I've edited a few little things for consistency's sake in the first three chapters. Edit notes on each chapter let you know what they are; I plan to delete those once this fic is marked complete, to tidy things up, but I wanted to honor all you early readers with transparency.
>
> A brief note on the use of 'namesake' in this chapter: Hildegard is proud of her namesake, Harry writes Quirrellmort. I looked up the word, which typically we use to refer to the person who is NAMED for someone else, not the someone else they're named for, and it turns out that it can also just mean someone who shares a name with someone/ something else. Harry doesn't care about all that but I do, and I thought you might find it interesting, too.
>
> Scarcrux's experience of the In-Between is inspired by C.S. Lewis' The Great Divorce, in which the souls from hell are so insubstantial that it hurts their feet to walk on the grass of heaven. "Reality is harsh to the feet of shadows" goes so hard.
>
> I also realized after the fact that Harry's last line to Scarcrux had accidentally quoted Buffy to Spike in

season 7 - "It's you, and it's me, and we'll get through this." I had to edit it to be slightly less blatant. Also Scarcrux's thought earlier that if he had just been a little louder or more clever, he could have saved Harry echoes Spike's words to Buffy in 6x03 "After Life."

Finally, on my last reread I noticed that the final forehead kiss was very much inspired by Christine's kiss to Erik in the novel version of the Phantom of the Opera! Obviously from Harry's POV it is more actual love than pity, but the pathos of it from Scarcrux's POV is very much Erik.

I hope you enjoyed the Scarcrux POV! I am thinking of playing around with other POVs going forward, too. Next chapter we'll be with Draco, and after that I might even dip into Hildegard's POV for part of a chapter. Let me know if there's anyone whose head you're really curious to get inside!

5. 5. Dear So-and-So

Summary for the Chapter:

Draco rides the Hogwarts Express with Harry and his friends.

Notes for the Chapter:

Some of Hermione's dialogue is taken directly from canon.

“Dear So-and-So, I’m sorry I couldn’t come to your party.

Dear So-and-So, I’m sorry I came to your party.”

- “Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out,” Richard Siken

Dear Harry,

I wish you could have come with us, you shouldn’t have had to put up with the Muggles at all. Father explained to me about Dumbledore, and while I understand that you don’t want to make any unnecessary enemies, Father is an important man too. He knows the Minister, you know. Anyway what I’m saying is that if you change your mind, we could help you.

I can’t believe you flew back by yourself! How did you know where to go? Did you have all your things with you?

I can’t wait to meet your snake. Everyone in Slytherin understands discretion, you won’t have to worry about it getting out. And if anyone does try to make any trouble for you, I’ll have Father talk to Severus. He’s the head of Slytherin, and also my godfather.

Aren’t you glad we happened to meet?

I can’t wait to hear about your wand. Mine is hawthorn and unicorn hair. Have you been practicing much? I have! I can already do a light

charm and a levitating charm. Working on the unlocking charm now.

Yours,

Draco

p.s. Hedwig is a dear. I gave her a mouse for her trouble.

Dear Draco,

I appreciate your offer. Trust me, if I can't figure something out by next summer, I will be throwing myself on the Malfoy hospitality. I never want to come back here, and certainly not with the Trace.

I just followed the roads to get down to Surrey. It looks different from the air, but it's all still there. Like a map. I had all my things in my pocket. Professor Quirrell made sure I could enlarge them again to his satisfaction before he gave them to me. He said too many students come to Hogwarts with luggage their parents shrunk for them, and then they have to embarrass themselves by getting a prefect to take care of it.

I am very glad we happened to meet. And not just because of your "connections" or whatever. Dudley—that's my bully of a cousin—he always made sure I never had any friends. You're my first one.

My order from Madame Malkins came in today. I almost feel like a proper wizard. I wish it were September already. I'm so ready to leave all this behind me.

Yours,

Harry

Dear Harry,

You're always welcome. I asked Father again, and he said even Albus Dumbledore can't force you to live with Muggles against your will,

not once the Minister gets involved. Mother thinks it's just awful they sent a baby to live with that sort of people. She's fixing up a room for you, even if it's just for visits.

I've added shrinking and enlargement charms to my practice repertoire. I'll have to thank this Professor Quirrell for the tip.

You seem to really like him, right? Father says it's odd, him taking an interest in you. He says Quirrell's always been a mousy thing, and worse lately. The board—Father's on the Hogwarts Board of Governors, did I tell you?---only went with him because there was no one else. It's hard to keep the position filled, Father says. Rumor is it's jinxed.

Speaking of jinxes, you ought to try some out on that cousin of yours. I'm enclosing a book you might find useful.

I am honored to be your first friend, Harry, and not just because you're famous or whatever. I liked you before I ever knew who you were. Even Father likes you. I don't think he meant to, but he couldn't help it. He says you're going to shake things up.

I wish it were September, too.

Yours,

Draco

Dear Draco,

Your father's not wrong about how Quirrell appears. His stammer is terribly distracting, I'll admit. But if you can look past all that, he's very clever. He was a Ravenclaw back at Hogwarts, and you can tell he's interested in all kinds of knowledge. Curiosity without judgment, that's the impression I get from him. Some of the books he found for me—well, let's just say he warned me not to be seen with them outside my dormitory. "Not everyone would be so open-minded," he said.

Speaking of books not to get caught with, I'm very much enjoying the

one you sent. I'm not planning to use any of it on Dudley—my only goal right now is to finish out the summer with as little fuss as possible—but I'm storing it up in case anyone tries to make trouble at school.

I reckon I can expect it on two fronts, if I Sort Slytherin: those outside the house who'll see me as a disappointment or even a traitor for going to the snakes, and those within who'll see me as a fraud or a threat for being, you know, who I am.

I'm not naive. I've been reading about the last war, and I know that some of our housemates will see me as the reason their relatives are in Azkaban. I want to be prepared in case anyone comes after me, especially the older students. But I don't want to make it worse by going out of my way to make enemies.

Maybe I am going to shake things up, but I want to be smart about it.

Yours,

Harry

Dear Harry,

Father was very interested in what you had to say about Quirrell. He says he'll have to keep an eye on him as well as you. (I'm fairly certain he means it in a good way.)

Don't worry about Slytherin. Sure, most of us know someone who was put away. My aunt's been in Azkaban nearly all my life. But that's hardly your fault, is it? You were just a baby.

If anyone tries to bother you about it, we'll make them regret it. Father says Slytherins will respect strength.

We're nearly through the month. How are you getting to the station? We'll Apparate directly to the platform, of course. Would you like us to pick you up?

Yours,

Draco

Dear Draco,

I think your father is right. Kids can smell weakness like a shark scents blood in the water. I will just have to trust that strength can count as much as a name.

It's very kind of you to offer, but I was just going to take the train in from Surrey. I'll meet you there!

Yours,

Harry

When the Malfoys arrive on Platform Nine and Three-quarters on the morning of September 1, Draco looks around at once for Harry. He finds him sitting on a bench with his nose in a book.

"Harry!" Draco calls, ignoring the heads that turn their way.

Harry looks up, his vacant look clearing into a wide smile as he sees Draco dragging his parents towards him. When Harry stands up, Draco can see that he's wearing some of the new robes that Draco had picked out at the shop for him, a charcoal gray set that fits him perfectly.

Draco extends his hand, but instead of shaking it, Harry uses it to tug Draco in for a hug. Draco stiffens in surprise for half a second, but he soon relaxes and returns Harry's embrace. It's so good to see his friend again after a month of only exchanging letters.

Harry pulls back. "Mr. Malfoy, Mrs. Malfoy, lovely to see you again."

Draco's father inclines his head. "And you as well, Mr. Potter. I trust your summer passed without incident?"

“The occasional sight of my wand was all it took.” Harry produces a wand from a holster on his upper arm. “I barely even had to use it.”

Draco peers at the wand in Harry’s hand. “You never did tell me about your wand. What is it?”

Harry turns the wand over in his fingers, staring at it. “Holly and phoenix feather. Took forever to find it—I think Ollivander had me try every wand in the shop before he brought it out.”

“The Dark Lord had a phoenix wand as well,” his father says, watching Harry keenly for his reaction.

Harry looks up at Draco’s father. “Apparently, it’s the same phoenix.”

Draco’s father arches an elegant brow. “Is it indeed?”

Draco doesn’t like not knowing what’s going on. “But what does that mean?”

“Ollivander called them brother wands,” says Harry, looking back at Draco. “He didn’t really explain it, though.”

“I would be surprised if even Ollivander knows much more than that,” says Draco’s mother. “Wandlore is more of an art than a science, and brother wands are so rare as to be almost mythical.”

“I sort of wonder what *he’d* think about it,” says Harry as he sheathes his wand.

Draco feels his father go still beside him as if Harry has again surprised him. His father looks around to make sure their conversation is still private, then asks Harry, “What would you *want* him to think about it?”

Harry’s mouth turns up at one corner. “I suppose I'd want him to think that it makes me interesting enough not to kill on sight.”

That startles a laugh out of Draco’s father. “I think it is more than your wand that makes you interesting, Mr. Potter.”

Draco’s mother lays a hand on his shoulder. “You’d best get on the

train now, boys. More families are arriving every minute."

"Yes, mother." Draco hugs his mother and gives his father a dignified nod.

"We look forward to news of your Sorting, gentlemen," says Draco's father with his eyes on Harry.

"Thank you, sir," says Harry, and the boys head towards the train.

"See that girl waving at us?" Draco points out a compartment near the front of the second car. "That's Pansy Parkinson. Her family are always embarrassingly early to everything. New money, says mother. Well. At least she's saved us a spot."

Harry follows him to Pansy's compartment. Draco likes that he's the one who gets to introduce Harry to their world. Harry's clever and charming enough that he'd probably do fine on his own, but it doesn't hurt to have a Malfoy smoothing the way. Besides, now everyone will know that Harry was Draco's friend first.

"Hello there, Pansy," Draco says with a knock on the half-open door to the compartment.

"Draco!" Pansy leaps up to hug Draco, which he bears with great patience. "Who's your friend?" she asks as she pulls away, casting a cool look at Harry.

Harry waves. "I'm Harry."

"Harry who?" demands Pansy, crossing her arms.

"Harry Potter, that's who, you absolute troll," says Draco. He pushes past Pansy to toss his trunk on the luggage rack. It's not heavy—Father made certain it was fitted out with a permanent feather-light charm—but the size still makes it a bit unruly.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" says Pansy, whirling to face Harry as he follows Draco into the compartment. She holds her hand out. "Pansy Parkinson."

Harry leaves her hanging just long enough for her to get nervous—

Draco sees her shoulders tense—but then he smiles and shakes her hand. “But that double take is so much fun.”

Pansy barks a laugh. “He’s funny, Draco. Where’d you find him?”

“Madame Malkins,” says Draco as he settles into a seat by the window. He’s pleased when Harry immediately sits down beside him.

“What’s at Madame Malkins?” says Blaise, who’s just appeared in the doorway.

“Harry Potter, apparently,” says Pansy from the seat beside Harry.

“Well, not anymore,” says Harry.

Blaise is quick. He cocks his head and looks at Harry. “You’re Potter, then?”

“Please, call me Harry.”

Blaise nods. “Blaise Zabini, good to meet you. Draco.”

“Blaise. How was Naples?”

“Oh, you know. By August, we’re all ready to die, sea breeze or no.” Blaise shows his teeth in a mean smile. “Especially my stepfather.”

Draco glances at Harry, who is hiding a small smile behind his fist. Maybe even he’s heard the rumors about Mrs. Zabini.

“You ever been, Harry?” Zabini’s eyes flit lazily back to Harry.

“I haven’t really got out much,” says Harry.

Draco wants to explain about Harry’s horrid Muggles, but before he can say anything, Crabbe and Goyle are shouldering their way into the compartment.

“Been where?” asks Goyle, heaving their trunks up to the rack.

“Italy,” says Harry.

“Italy’s overrated,” says Crabbe.

“Good food, though,” says Goyle.

Crabbe is leveling an unimpressed stare at Harry. “Who are you?”

“Harry,” says Harry with an outstretched hand.

Crabbe looks at Draco for approval. Draco gives him a look that says, *Well, go on.*

Crabbe takes Harry’s hand. “Just Harry?”

Harry smiles, more to himself than anything, and Draco wonders what that’s about. “Just Harry.”

Pansy snorts. “I get it now, it is kind of fun.”

Harry shares a mischievous look with her. Crabbe and Goyle also share a look, but theirs is one of confusion.

Crabbe shrugs. “I’m Crabbe.”

“Just Crabbe?” says Harry. Draco snickers.

“That’s right,” says Crabbe with a straight face. “And this is Goyle.”

“Just Goyle,” says Goyle.

Everyone laughs, even Blaise, and he’s usually cool as a cucumber.

The door opens again, and a small figure backs into the compartment, dragging his trunk behind him. “Is there room for me?” the boy says, turning.

“Theo! Darling!” cries Pansy. “We’ll squeeze.”

“Hullo, Pansy. I say, could I get some help with my trunk? Father wouldn’t put the charms on for me, said I had to learn it myself, only I never quite got the hang of it in time.”

Harry stands up. “Here, I’ve got it.” And even though he and Theo are half the size of Crabbe and Goyle, they manage to lever Theo’s trunk up easily enough.

Theo wipes his hands on his robes before offering one to Harry. “Theo Nott. I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

Harry shakes Theo’s hand. “Harry.”

“Just Harry!” calls Crabbe, and everyone starts laughing again. Draco can’t believe how well this is going. The train hasn’t even left the station yet, and Harry already has an inside joke with his friends.

Theo peers closely at Harry and almost looks as if he might say something, but then he just sits down beside Pansy. It’s a bit tight with four of them on the bench, but neither Draco, Harry, Pansy, nor Theo is particularly large, and anyway, Draco doesn’t mind being pressed up against Harry. It’s all a bit cozy. Across from Draco is Blaise, then Crabbe, then Goyle by the door.

“So where’d Harry come from?” says Theo.

“Madame Malkins, apparently,” says Blaise without looking away from the window. The train begins to move.

“Not *originally,* Blaise. Honestly,” says Pansy.

Harry gets a wistful little smile that Draco is dying to ask him about, but not in front of everyone.

“I didn’t mean *originally,* ” Theo snipes back.

“I’m with Draco,” says Harry, and Draco feels a pleased flush rise on his cheeks. “We met at Madame Malkins and kept in touch.”

“And originally?” says Blaise.

“Surrey,” says Harry.

The conversation moves on. Harry might be the new curiosity, but the others have known each other nearly all their lives and have a summer to compare notes on. Pansy and Blaise, always happy to be in on a joke, make sure to redirect Theo, Crabbe, and Goyle any time it seems like they might discover Harry’s identity too soon.

Harry mostly just listens quietly. Draco explains things when he can

—“Theo’s ancestral home is up north, so he has the best idea what sort of weather we can expect in Scotland,” and “Mrs. Parkinson thinks she can marry Pansy off to a Malfoy, but Pansy and I haven’t decided yet if we’re going to let her”—but Harry doesn’t seem to have any trouble following the threads of conversation. If Draco didn’t know any better, he might think Harry had been familiar with them all for years.

“Father made me work through the entire first grade book of spells,” complains Theo at one point.

“Theo’s dad is an absolute tyrant about scholarship,” says Draco. “Even odds say Theo ends up Sorting Ravenclaw.”

“It would serve his father right,” says Pansy. “All that work, and it doesn’t even go to Slytherin!”

Theo shudders. “Can you imagine? I’d be *disinherited.* ”

Everyone laughs, knowing this is mostly an exaggeration.

“So all your families have been in Slytherin?” asks Harry, looking around the compartment.

“My mum was a Hufflepuff, but we don’t talk about that,” says Goyle.

“The marriage contract had been in place since they were in nappies,” explains Draco. “By the time they went to Hogwarts, it was too late to change it.”

Harry looks surprised. “Is that normal?”

“Not so much anymore,” says Goyle.

“Do any of you have marriage contracts?” asks Harry.

“Nah, not formally,” says Crabbe. “My folks have an understanding with the Bulstrodes, but nothing magically binding.”

“Things are more relaxed these days,” says Pansy. “Families are still involved, but it’s unusual for a contract to be formalized before we’ve at least sat our O.W.L.s.”

“Less chance of accidentally muddying your family line with idiots,” says Theo.

“More chance your kid does something scandalous like running off with a Mudblood, though,” says Crabbe. “That’s what my mum says, anyway.”

“Draco, didn’t your aunt—”

“Shut up, *Gregory,* we don’t talk about her,” says Draco.

Goyle’s face turns red, but before he can respond, the door clatters open.

“Anything from the cart, dears?” says a dumpy witch with red, dimpled cheeks.

Insults forgotten, Draco turns his attention to the candy trolley. Crabbe and Goyle are getting a few boxes of those wretched jelly beans; Pansy clutches a handful of licorice wands. Blaise acts like he’s above it all, reluctantly handing over a few sickles for a pumpkin pasty, and Theo actually is above it all. Draco buys Cauldron Cakes to share with Harry, while Harry gets an armful of Chocolate Frogs.

After the trolley lady leaves, Harry passes out the frogs, one for each of them. Even Theo takes one.

Pansy and Blaise watch as Harry starts to open his frog, no doubt waiting to see if a bit of hopping candy might get the best of Harry Potter. But the frog’s single leap just lands it in Harry’s hand, and he promptly bites off its head.

“Good reflexes,” says Blaise. “You play Quidditch?”

Blaise doesn’t know Harry grew up with Muggles. Draco wants to brag that Harry’s instincts are that good even without ever touching a Quaffle, but Harry answers before he can say anything.

“Not yet. I just got a broom, though. I love flying.” Harry exchanges a secret smile with Draco, who knows that Harry flew home from London all by himself. Draco can’t wait to fly with Harry.

Harry takes the last bite of his Chocolate Frog as Pansy is opening hers. “Oh, no, you don’t,” she says to the frog crouching for a jump. She hits it on the head, and it slumps over in submission. Not even candy will cross Pansy Parkinson.

Pansy takes the card out of the Chocolate Frog’s wrapper. “Ooh, Hypatia! I haven’t got her yet. Daphne has two, but she wouldn’t trade, not even for St. Hedwig.”

Harry brightens. “I named my owl after St. Hedwig!”

Crabbe and Goyle have each eaten their frogs in one go. “Merlin again,” says Crabbe glumly. “Don’t suppose anyone wants to trade?”

“Are you kidding?” says Theo, who’s slid the card out of his package while keeping the frog trapped inside. “I’ve finally got Virgilius the Sorcerer. You’ll have to rip this one off my corpse.”

“Don’t tempt us,” says Blaise, but he’s not paying the cards much attention. He hasn’t even opened his yet.

“Anyone want Cassandra?” asks Goyle.

Pansy snaps her fingers at him, and he hands over the card.

Draco starts in on his. He almost loses the frog on the first jump, but Harry snatches it out of the air and hands it back to him. Draco is faintly aware that he ought to be annoyed at being shown up, but all he can think of is the smear of chocolate on Harry’s cheek. Sometimes, Harry seems so much older than he is, but the brown smudge makes him look like a boy again. Draco likes it.

Draco pulls his own card out. “A premonition, do we think?” he asks the compartment, turning the card around to show off Salazar Slytherin’s scowling face.

“Give it to Theo, for luck!” crows Pansy.

Draco gives it to Harry instead, who takes it with a smile. “What’d you get, Harry?” asks Draco.

Harry pulls his card out. When he sees what it is, he presses his lips

together, and Draco can't tell if he's frustrated or amused.

"Well?" prods Pansy.

Harry hands her the card.

"Hah! Dumbledore! You can have this right back." She tosses the card at Harry, and once again, he grabs it from the air.

Harry looks like he might toss the card over with the other rubbish, but then he sighs and puts it in his pocket with the Salazar Slytherin card. Draco wonders what that's about.

There's a knock at the door.

"Go away!" calls Goyle. Everyone but Harry laughs.

A minute later, there's another knock, but the door slides open without waiting for an answer. A bushy-haired girl stands frowning in the doorway with her hands on her hips. A round-faced boy can be seen just behind her. The Longbottom boy, Draco thinks.

"Has anyone seen a toad? Neville's lost one," the girl says briskly.

"Sure it wasn't a Chocolate Frog that got away? He looks the type," says Draco. He looks to see if he's made Harry laugh, but Harry is staring at the bossy girl like he's seen a ghost.

"Did anyone try Summoning it?" Harry asks the girl.

"Is that a spell?" the girl says, eyes cutting to Harry.

Harry stands up. Draco wants to tug on his robes to pull him back down. What is he *doing* ?

"Yeah, let me try," Harry says, drawing his wand. He walks to the doorway, making the girl back up into the passageway. " *Accio* T— erm, what's the toad's name?" he asks the boy.

"Trevor," the boy says.

Harry snaps his wand up, saying, " *Accio* Trevor!"

Nothing happens for a second. Then there's a muffled crash from down the corridor, and the next moment, a fat, ugly toad smacks into Harry's open hand. It lets out a miserable croak.

Harry grins and hands the toad back to the doughy boy. "There you go."

"Say, thanks!" says the boy, clutching the toad tight to his chest. The toad does not look happy about this. They wander off down the corridor, but the girl stays behind.

"How did you know to do that?" she demands. "I've never heard of that spell before, and I've learned all our course books by heart.

Harry smiles at the girl almost fondly, which is ridiculous because Draco has never seen such a pathetic swot. "It's a summoning spell," says Harry. "You won't find it in our first year books, but I bet you could learn it with no trouble. I could teach you, if you like."

The girl's eyes light up. "Oh, *would* you? Nobody in my family's magic at all, it was ever such a surprise when I got my letter, but I was ever so pleased, of course, I mean, it's the very best school of witchcraft there is, I've heard—I'm Hermione Granger, by the way, who are you?"

She says all this very fast.

Harry is grinning by now, and it makes Draco irrationally jealous of this nobody little Mudblood.

"It's very good to meet you, Hermione," says Harry, and he sticks his hand out as if she were someone important. "I'm Harry."

The girl shakes his hand firmly. She studies his face like it's a textbook with all the answers when suddenly she freezes.

"You're—"

" *Just* Harry. Please."

She narrows her eyes but relents. "Well, I suppose it's none of my business. You really mean it, about teaching me that spell?"

“I promise. Something tells me I’ll be able to find you in the library.”

The girl brightens. “Oh, yes! Did you know there are over three *million* items in the Hogwarts library? I read it in—”

“ *Hogwarts: A History,* ” Harry finishes, smiling again. “I read it this month.”

“Did you really? Do you know what House you’ll be in? I’ve been asking around, and I hope I’m in Gryffindor, it sounds by far the best; I hear Dumbledore himself was in it, but I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn’t be too bad…”

Harry’s smile has only grown during this ridiculous speech. The rest of them are making faces at each other behind his back.

“No, I suppose Ravenclaw wouldn’t be too bad,” Harry agrees. “You’re a fan of Dumbledore?”

“He’s quite possibly the greatest wizard alive! I mean, he defeated Grindelwald!”

“Do you collect Frog cards?” Harry asks, digging his out of his pocket.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Here, I just got Dumbledore. Why don’t you take him? He can start your collection.”

The girl takes the card from Harry. She gasps. “Oh, I always forget the pictures can *move* ! Isn’t magic wonderful?”

Harry’s smile is almost a little sad as he steps back into the compartment. “I’ll see you at the feast, Hermione Granger,” he says into the corridor before sliding the door closed.

Pansy blows out a loud breath as Harry returns to his seat. “Phew, I thought she’d never leave!”

“Harry seemed happy enough,” says Crabbe with a mean glint in his eye.

“Yeah, maybe he *fancies* her,” says Goyle.

“Fancy a *Mudblood* ?” Draco splutters. “He was just being polite!”

Harry stiffens beside him. “I wish you wouldn’t say that,” he says mildly enough, but Draco has the sense he’s meant to feel ashamed. How can he make Harry understand?

“It’s not your fault, Harry,” Draco says, “but you have to know—if you’re going to be in Slytherin with us, you have to be careful of the kind of connections you make.”

“Oh, please,” says Harry, turning to Draco. “That girl was the biggest brain I’ve ever met. Ten Galleons says she’s top of our year. She’ll probably go into medicine or politics or something important like that. Isn’t that *exactly* the kind of connection I want to make?”

Draco is surprised at how pragmatic Harry’s argument is. He expected some sentimental tripe about how blood doesn’t really matter. “But she’s a Mu—a Muggleborn!” He’d caught himself just in time, remembering Harry’s mother.

Harry raises his eyebrows. “Are you telling me that the famous Slytherin ambition cares more about blood than power?”

“Blood *is* power,” says Blaise. “That’s just how the world works.”

Harry looks around the compartment. Everyone is tense, gearing up for an argument. He sighs. “I don’t want to fight about it. But if the price of your friendship is telling me who I can and can’t talk to, we’re going to have a problem.”

“You can do as you like, of course,” sniffs Pansy. “Draco’s just trying to warn you about what to expect in Slytherin. But perhaps you’d be happier in Ravenclaw with that harpy.”

Draco feels something moving against his arm where it’s pressed against Harry’s. He looks over to see what it is, just in time to see a little white snout poking out of Harry’s sleeve. Draco jumps. “A snake! You brought your snake!”

Harry’s face melts into a soft smile as he brings his other hand over

for the snake to crawl out onto. “Hello there, darling. Trying to make sure we’re all getting along?”

As she slithers all the way out of Harry’s sleeve, Draco can see that she’s a white snake with orange splotches. She curls around Harry’s other wrist and lifts her head up to hiss at Harry. He smiles as if she’s said something funny.

Harry looks over at Pansy. “How do you think they’d feel about Hildegard in Ravenclaw?”

“Bloody hell,” says Crabbe.

“Merlin’s balls,” agrees Goyle.

“Alright, I take it back,” says Pansy, blanching a bit as the snake turns tiny red eyes on her and flicks out her tongue. “No one else would have you, Harry.”

Blaise has finally started to open his Chocolate Frog. He gets a hand around it while it’s still in the wrapper and pulls it out carefully for a bite. Once it’s stilled, he takes the card out. He laughs.

“What’s so funny?” asks Crabbe, trying to see the card.

Blaise passes it over to Draco. “What do you think, Draco? How’s the resemblance?”

Harry looks over Draco’s shoulder. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“What? Who is it?” says Goyle.

“Just Harry,” Draco says, tossing the card over to Goyle.

“ *Harry Potter?”* Crabbe and Goyle exclaim together.

“I knew it!” cries Theo.

“You did not,” says Blaise.

“I thought I saw the scar when he helped me with my trunk,” says Theo. “But you lot were being so bloody weird about it, I decided to

let it go."

"You can tell Theo's the smart one," Harry says, "because he had the same reaction as Hermione. Figure it out, and shut up."

"I just thought you were a Halfblood embarrassed about your name," says Goyle.

"I mean, I am a Halfblood, but I'm not embarrassed about it. I'm sorry for having you on. It's just, this is probably the last time in a while I'll get to meet anyone without them knowing who I am first. I sort of wanted to see how it would go."

"Does it bother you? Being famous and all?" says Crabbe.

"It did at first. You have to understand, I was raised by Muggles. Until a month ago, I didn't know anything about 'Harry Potter,' the baby with a Chocolate Frog card. So the first trip to Diagon was a bit overwhelming."

"If it makes you feel any better, I didn't know who he was either until half an hour after we'd met," says Draco.

"I tried not to use my last name then, either, but your father recognized me," says Harry, laughing. "Apparently, I look a lot like my dad."

"I saw you chatting it up with Draco's parents on the platform before we left," says Pansy. "You all looked quite chummy."

"Father's taken quite a liking to Harry," says Draco.

"Lucius Malfoy doesn't like anybody," says Blaise. "Except maybe those peacocks of yours."

"Oh, come off it, Blaise," says Draco.

"I can't believe Harry Potter has a pet snake," Theo is saying to himself. "The iconography is all wrong."

"The what?" whispers Goyle.

“I can't believe Harry Potter wants to be in Slytherin!” says Pansy, ignoring Goyle. “I'm not imagining that, right? You're not just screwing with us?”

“Why would I screw with you?” says Harry innocently, rubbing a finger on his snake's little head.

“You screwed with *us* !” complains Crabbe.

“Awfully Slytherin of him, don't you think, Crabbe?” says Draco, grinning.

Notes for the Chapter:

> A note on luggage: all we know from canon is that passengers wrestle their own trunks onto the train and then leave it for someone else, presumably elves, to take up to the castle. The shrinking and feather-light charms are my own addition, then, but I feel like it makes sense that spoiled Pureblood children would have a leg up even with the luggage. Just one more way of setting them above the rabble.

6. 6. The Hero Shifts

Summary for the Chapter:

SLYTHERIN!

“Every morning another chapter where the hero shifts
From one foot to the other.”

- Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out,” Richard Siken

Harry can’t believe how much fun he’s had riding the train with Draco’s friends. It’s one thing to know that he belongs in Slytherin House this time around—Slytherin is, after all, Voldemort’s birthright, and home to all of his oldest connections. Harry knows that if he intends to win over Voldemort himself, he’ll have to win over these families as well, sooner or later.

It’s another thing entirely to be enjoying the process quite so much, especially this early on.

Yes, they’re all still eleven. In many ways, Harry is playing a part here. But the burden of it is light enough that several times over the last four hours, Harry has almost forgotten that he is actually a traumatized nineteen-year-old in a child’s body, or that he’d known all of these people before.

Not that knowing what each of their faces will look like in seven years means that he’d actually *known* them.

You are insufferably sentimental, the horcrux tells Harry fondly.

Harry and his Voldemort have spent the last month learning how to communicate with each other more consciously. They’ve progressed from feelings and impressions to mental conversations that have become a constant background to their days.

You’re having just as much fun as I am, Harry replies.

Not because I've deluded myself into considering these infants my friends, says the Horcrux, but Harry can feel his amusement.

The world outside the train window has been dark for some time now, which means they must be getting close to Hogwarts.

Draco is the first to notice the cluster of lights in the distance. "Say, do you think that's Hogsmeade?"

"Must be," says Blaise. "We should be nearly there."

A voice echoes through the train as if it heard them. "We will be reaching Hogwarts in five minutes' time. Please leave your luggage on the train, it will be taken to the school separately."

"I suppose we'd best get our robes switched out," says Pansy.

They've all come prepared, wearing under-robes or trousers that can go with the school uniforms, so no one kicks Pansy out to change. They all rummage in their trunks or satchels for the plain Hogwarts robes. Harry pulls his from his pocket and quietly enlarges it.

Theo notices. "So that's where your things were. Did you shrink them all yourself?"

Harry remembers Theo complaining about his father's insistence that he learn the charms for his own trunk. "Professor Quirrell made me practice before he'd shrink my purchases for me."

Harry has already told them about meeting Quirrell in Diagon Alley. He knows Quirrell is trying to keep a low profile, but it amuses him to think of his cohort of Slytherins being predisposed to admire the timid professor, stammer and all.

"I've been practicing too," announces Draco, shrinking his own trunk with a flourish and tucking it into his pocket.

Theo watches greedily. "Maybe I could manage that one."

Harry shows him the wand movement. Theo drags his trunk off the overhead rack and sets it on the floor in front of him. His tongue pokes out of the corner of his mouth as he concentrates.

“Reducio!”

The trunk disappears. Theo raises panicked eyes to Harry.

“Sorry, I forgot to say you sort of have to visualize how big or small you want it to end up,” says Harry with a wince. He points his own wand at the spot where Theo’s trunk disappeared. *“Engorgio,”* he says, letting just enough power zing through his wand to get the trunk to the miniature size he wants.

Theo stoops down to pick it up. “Guess I still have to work on that one.”

“Guess I still have to work on my teaching,” says Harry.

“You can practice on the Mudblood,” says Crabbe.

Harry bites his tongue. He’s already picked one fight about it today. He can’t expect them to adjust their entire worldview overnight. It’s not their fault that when they call Hermione a Mudblood, he sees the dripping letters that Bellatrix Lestrange had carved into his friend’s flesh.

That was another life, says the Horcrux. *That will never happen now. We will make sure of it.*

Harry sends a feeling of fierce agreement through their bond before asking his friends if anyone else needs help with their trunk.

“I think I’ve got it,” says Blaise. He shrinks his own trunk and pockets it.

The train grinds to a halt.

“You’d better do mine for me, Harry,” says Pansy. “They’ll be unloading us now.”

Harry shrinks Pansy’s trunk, then looks questioningly at Crabbe and Goyle.

Crabbe waves him off. “Elves’ll get it. They like to feel useful.”

Not for the first time, Harry wonders what Dobby is up to. Nothing had tempted him to take Draco up on his invitation this summer so much as the desire to see Dobby again. He looks forward to the Christmas holidays, which he's already promised to spend with the Malfoys. It will be good to see another friend again.

The seven children wait until the crowd pushing past their door has thinned before they file into the corridor. Harry scans the heads in front of him for his old friends. He finds Hermione's bushy hair ahead of him, but every time he catches a flash of red hair in the crowd, it's a different Weasley.

You know he might not like you so much this time, says the horcrux.

I know he's not my Ron. But I'll never forgive myself if I don't try.

Outside, it's dark and cold. Harry silently casts a warming charm on himself when he starts to shiver.

Down to the right of the platform, a lamp bobs in Hagrid's raised hand. "First years! First years over here!"

Harry leads his group over to Hagrid.

"All right there, Harry?"

"Never better!"

"Good lad," Hagrid says with a warm smile for Harry. He nods at the rest of them. "Come on, follow me—any more first years? Mind your step, now! First years follow me!"

They follow Hagrid down the steep, narrow path to the boats.

"Does it have to be so *dark* ?" complains Pansy.

In his mind, Harry hears Ron yelling at Hermione over the Devil's Snare: *ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?* He feels the horcrux's amusement.

"Lumos," says Harry, raising his lighted wand to illuminate as much of the path as possible.

“Lumos!” Draco copies him, and another comforting light winks into existence. That’s right, Draco had said he’d been practicing.

“Oh, I can do this one!” says Theo. *“Lumos!”*

Blaise and Pansy follow suit, and soon everyone is looking to the little band of Slytherins, whose wands are bathing the rocky path in far more light than Hagrid’s little lantern can manage. A few meters ahead, Harry sees another wand light up—Hermione, this time—and another, and another. It looks like about half the first years have been practicing the light charm. Harry feels absurdly proud of them all, even though he’s had nothing to do with it, other than raising the first light.

An answering flush of pride comes from the horcrux. *Look at how they follow you.*

Hagrid turns and notices. “Oh, well done, everyone! You’ll get your first sight of Hogwarts in a sec. Just round this bend here.”

As they round the bend, the path opens suddenly onto the far shore of the Black Lake. The lights of Hogwarts shine high on the other side and it takes Harry’s breath away just as much as the first time. Then, it was the magic of a brand new world. Now, it’s the magic of homecoming.

“Nox,” Harry whispers, and the others follow suit. Between the golden light of Hogwarts’ windows and the cool white light of the waning crescent moon, they don’t need their wands to see.

“No more than four to a boat!” calls Hagrid.

Harry ends up in a boat with Draco, Theo, and Blaise. Pansy goes with a group that Harry remembers as the other Slytherin girls in their year. He doesn’t see what happened to Crabbe and Goyle until halfway across the lake, when he notices them huddled in a boat across from Neville and Hermione, of all people. They’re not talking, but it hardly matters: it looks like Hermione’s nervous chatter hasn’t let up for a second.

In one of the last boats, Harry finally sees Ron. He’s ended up with

Seamus Finnegan, Justin Finch-Fletchley, and Terry Boot. It might be an even more awkward group than Hermione's.

Harry watches the first boats drift through a curtain of ivy in the cliff face.

"Heads down!" warns Hagrid.

As the water carries them through a dark tunnel beneath the castle, Harry wonders where they are in relation to the Chamber of Secrets or the labyrinth protecting the Sorcerer's Stone this year. Is the Stone even there yet?

He and the horcrux have run through so many different questions and plans about the Stone. Each one comes back to the same problem: Harry refuses to take any action without knowing how Voldemort feels about it. The horcrux is always quick to remind him that since *he* is Voldemort, or *a* Voldemort, they can already know how Voldemort might feel about the various scenarios. But Harry insists on involving the man himself, as soon as he can be reasonably sure he won't be killed for his trouble.

He is already fascinated by you, the horcrux reminds him for the hundredth time. *Tell him you are his living horcrux, returned to him out of a terrible future, and he will bind you to himself for eternity.*

As long as we're talking more 'marked as his equal' than princess in a tower, that doesn't sound so bad.

The boats finally run aground on a rocky shore in a large underground chamber. Everyone clambers out of the boats to follow Hagrid, whose lamp leads the way up a sloping passageway in the rock. Harry lights his wand again, and the others follow suit, filling the tunnel with a warm glow.

They come out at the base of the great stone steps at the castle's entrance.

"Everyone here?" asks Hagrid, casting an eye over the little crowd of first years.

"It's not as if anyone is going to say 'no' if they're not," says Blaise.

He's my favorite, says the horcrux.

Hagrid knocks three times on the huge wooden door, and it swings open to reveal Professor McGonagall on the other side. Harry's first thought is how much younger she looks. Not *young* , certainly. Harry knows that she is, objectively, very old—nearly as old as Voldemort. But not until the war had she really looked her age.

"The first years, Professor McGonagall," says Hagrid, bowing.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

McGonagall opens the door wide, and the first year students follow her into the massive entrance hall. She leads them into the small antechamber that Harry knows will open onto the Great Hall. Everyone is forced to crowd close together. Harry finds himself at the edge of his band of Slytherins, pressed against Draco on one side and Hermione on the other.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," says McGonagall. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your Houses."

McGonagall explains about the Houses and tells the students to smarten up before the ceremony. Then she leaves the chamber, promising to collect the students presently.

"How exactly do they sort us into Houses?" says a voice behind Harry.

The voice that answers is familiar and beloved. "Some sort of test, I think. Fred says it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking."

Harry turns around to see Ron standing next to a nervous-looking Justin Finch-Fletchley. Harry's heart warms at the sight of his first and dearest friend.

"It's a hat," says Harry. "A talking hat. Reckon it doesn't hurt a bit." He smiles encouragingly at Ron.

"Did someone tell you that?" asks Ron, suspicious. "They might have been having you on, like my brothers."

Hermione butts in. “He’s quite right, you know. It’s in *Hogwarts: A History*. ”

Ron bristles at Hermione’s condescending tone, and for a second, it feels so familiar that Harry wants to laugh, or maybe cry. There’s a comforting touch in his mind, as if the horcrux has laid a hand on his shoulder.

“A hat doesn’t sound so bad,” Ron says eventually.

The ghosts come and leave, and McGonagall returns. She tells the students to queue up and follow her into the Hall.

The students ahead of Harry gaze up in wonder at the floating candles and the starry ceiling. Harry hears Hermione whispering something to Neville about *Hogwarts: A History* . Harry, who’s seen it all many times before, is much more interested in the Head Table. There sits Dumbledore at the center, with Snape beside him, and then Quirrell on Snape’s other side. Quirrell’s head is wrapped in a purple turban.

Harry locks eyes with Quirrell. His scar warms, and his arms prickle with gooseflesh. Quirrell nods. Harry nods back, and then he’s passing the Head Table to queue up with the other first years for their turn under the Sorting Hat. As he walks by the professors, he ignores Dumbledore's benevolent stare and Snape's malevolent one, but returns Hagrid’s eager wave with a smile.

All the way, he can feel the heat of Quirrell’s gaze on him.

McGonagall brings out the Hat and places it on a stool in front of the line of first years. When it sings its song about the Houses, Harry pays more attention to the Slytherin verse than he used to:

Or perhaps in Slytherin
You’ll make your real friends,
Those cunning folk use any means
To achieve their ends.

Harry has already made some real friends in Slytherin, even though none of them have been officially Sorted yet. But he’s not ultimately

here for them. No, the end that tempts Harry to “use any means” is a friendship far more fraught.

What if Voldemort decides that he has enough horcruxes already and he’d better kill Harry just to be safe? What if he tries to lock Harry away or put him in an enchanted sleep? What if he expects Harry to take the Dark Mark and kill for him? There are so many ways this could go wrong.

A wave of reassurance flows from the horcrux. It feels like a warmth in his chest and a pulsing in his scar. Harry takes a deep breath, accepting the comfort his Voldemort offers.

McGonagall calls, “Abbott, Hannah!” and the Sorting begins.

As “Bulstrode, Millicent” goes to Slytherin, Pansy cranes her head around Draco’s shoulder to get Harry’s attention.

“Psst! Potter!”

“Pansy, don’t be a pest,” hisses Draco.

Michael Corner goes to Ravenclaw.

“What is it?” Harry whispers.

“You’re about to make me ten Galleons!” says Pansy, undeterred.

“What are you talking about?” says Harry as McGonagall calls Crabbe to the Hat.

“Tracey Davis didn’t believe me when I said we’d be getting Harry Potter in Slytherin, so I asked if she was willing to bet on it,” says Pansy.

“I’m tempted to go to the lions just to spite you,” says Harry, laughing.

“You wouldn’t dare!” says Draco.

Harry smirks as Tracey Davis is called up. “Don’t you think I’d look rather fetching in scarlet and gold? Just think, Draco, we could be

rival Seekers!"

"The green will bring out your eyes better," grumbles Draco.

The Hat sends Justin to Hufflepuff, Seamus to Gryffindor, Anthony Goldstein to Ravenclaw, and Goyle to Slytherin as Harry keeps teasing Malfoy about a Gryffindor Harry Potter.

"My parents were in Gryffindor, you know. I bet McGonagall has such a soft spot for them she lets me get away with anything. Especially once I start winning Quidditch games for her. Dumbledore will love me. I bet some big happy Gryffindor family adopts me."

"Granger, Hermione" spends even longer under the Hat than Harry remembers from the first time around, but she still goes to Gryffindor.

"Yes, yes, and you'll start a study group with Granger and take over the world with an army of Halfbloods and Muggleborns," says Pansy, impatient. "Are you so desperate to spite me that you'd subject your poor little Hildegard to Gryffindor Tower?"

Draco huffs. "It's not as if it's really Harry's *choice.* The Hat tells us where to go. There's no question where Harry belongs."

Harry raises an eyebrow. "Did you see how long Granger was under the Hat? I'd bet ten Galleons of my own that she talked back to it."

Pansy snickers. "Bullied the Sorting Hat into putting her in Gryffindor. Hope *that* doesn't backfire."

"You're on," says Draco. "Ten Galleons says the Hat was just sorting through Granger's impossible hair."

Neville goes to Gryffindor, after spending even longer under the Hat than Hermione did, and Ernie Macmillan to Hufflepuff.

"Malfoy, Draco!"

"Save me a seat," says Harry, clapping Draco's back. Draco relaxes at the reassurance that Harry was definitely just joking about the lions.

Draco marches up to the stool like he owns it and is promptly sorted into Slytherin. The Slytherin table all applaud.

Harry imagines the stunned silence that will greet his own sorting. It gives him an idea.

“Hey, Pansy,” he says into the girl’s ear as McGonagall calls her name. “Wouldn’t it be funny if no one clapped for me?”

He can tell by the light in Pansy’s eye that she agrees. After the Hat sends her to Slytherin, he sees her whispering something to the other first years at the table. Draco looks over at Harry, a question in his eyes. Harry nods.

Parvati goes to Gryffindor and Padma to Ravenclaw, and then it’s Harry’s turn.

“Potter, Harry!”

Silence falls across the Great Hall. Harry feels every eye on him as he steps out of line to take his place on the stool. Then, whispers break the stillness in waves. The Gryffindor table buzzes excitedly; the Slytherins are all silent sneers, even Draco and his friends, although their sneers have a more knowing and self-satisfied flavor. The teachers at the Head Table don’t whisper, but Harry feels the weight of their attention as he passes. Hagrid, Quirrell, Snape, Dumbledore.

He sits on the stool. McGonagall places the Hat on his head, and the room disappears.

“Oh my,” the Hat croons in his ear. “I haven’t Sorted a time traveler in over two hundred years, and never one like you. What a little marvel you are, Friend of Death.”

You can see all that? Harry thinks nervously. What else can the Hat see?

“Oh, all that and more,” the Hat says, chuckling.

You don’t… report *on us, do you?*

“I tell no tales, soul-bearer. Your new House’s founder made sure of

that, or he'd never have worked with the other three to make me."

Does that mean…?

"As if there was ever any doubt. Unusual ambitions you have, little hero, but it's clear you'll achieve them in SLYTHERIN!"

Voldemort has been watching the Potter boy through Quirrell's eyes since he marched into the Hall in a line of otherwise unremarkable first years. He'd been pleased to see that the boy's gaze had gone straight to Quirrell, and even more pleased that he'd had the subtlety to acknowledge it with nothing more than a return of Quirrell's small nod.

Voldemort might intend to cultivate the boy this year, but he still requires Quirrell to remain as unobtrusive as possible. It's no secret that he made Potter's acquaintance in Diagon Alley this summer—doubtless, the giant reported to Dumbledore every word his simple mind managed to remember—but he cannot afford to draw undue scrutiny.

When the Hat calls Slytherin for Potter, the silence that hushes the Hall is resounding. Beside Quirrell, Severus goes statue-still. Voldemort can see the man's fingers go white around his goblet of wine. Beyond him, Dumbledore, too, is tense, sharp eyes trained on Potter as the boy takes the Hat off his head and replaces it on the stool.

Not a single clap or cheer comes from the Slytherin table. It puts Voldemort in mind of his own Sorting. The House of legacies had not been kind to an unknown Mudblood. But he had won them over in the end, as he expects Potter will also.

"They will eat him alive," Severus says quietly to Dumbledore, sounding rather pleased at the prospect.

"Perhaps he bites back," stammers Quirrell.

"He had better not," says Severus, scowling. "He will find that Slytherin does not afford him the scope to run amok that his…

predecessors may have found in Gryffindor."

This amuses Voldemort, who had run amok with impunity when he was in Slytherin fifty years before, although he allows that Severus likely runs a tighter ship than Horace Slughorn.

"Let us not be so hasty to condemn young Mr. Potter to either misery or delinquency, Severus," says Dumbledore. "Look."

Potter has reached the Slytherin table. The older students are still eyeing him with suspicion and disdain, but a number of the other first years have stood up to shake his hand and clap his back. Everyone is smiling, even Potter. When they sit back down, Potter is sitting between an angular blonde boy—the Malfoy heir, presumably—and a snub-nosed, black-haired girl.

Voldemort pays little attention to the rest of the Sorting. His eyes are on Potter, whose uniform already sports the Slytherin green trimmings. It suits him.

"Zabini, Blaise" goes to Slytherin, and the Sorting is over. Dumbledore stands and declaims a series of nonsense words. Tiresome man. Voldemort comforts himself with the image of his lifeless corpse broken over the flagstones of the Great Hall. Soon.

The feast appears now, and every table is piled heavy with rich foods. Most students seem to have moved on from the drama of Harry Potter's Sorting. Even at the Slytherin table, the focus is now on the Bloody Baron, who sits stiff and silent beside the Malfoy boy. Voldemort watches as Potter begins to draw the old ghost into conversation. Before long, the students around them have relaxed enough to join in.

It's a different sort of charisma than Tom Riddle had possessed, warm and open where he'd been calculating, but no less effective for all that. And this is after only a single day. Voldemort can well imagine a future in which these young people would follow Potter into hell for love of him. This makes it even more imperative to secure the boy's loyalty to Voldemort above all others.

Harry Potter's Voldemort is enjoying his third first day of Hogwarts far more than the first. Back then, he was an impoverished nobody from a Muggle orphanage. Hogwarts was a revelation, but he didn't *enjoy* Slytherin until he started to claw his way up the social ranks by fifth year or so.

The second time he'd started Hogwarts had been a mixed joy: Harry was happy, therefore so was he. Yet, with the impassable veil between Harry's mind and his, it was more of a stolen pleasure than a shared one. He knows now that it was but a pale imitation of what life with his Harry was meant to be, like the shadows that reality casts on a cave wall.

This day has been nothing like the others. He woke early with his Harry after a night spent dreaming in each other's arms. They made breakfast for the Muggles one last time, but only the woman came downstairs before they left, padding down in her dressing gown just as Harry put a hand to the door.

"That's it, then?" she said, her tone hard to read.

"That's it," Harry replied.

The woman pressed her lips together before bursting out, almost as if against her will, "Do try not to get yourself killed."

Voldemort felt the surprise spark through Harry at his aunt's sour admonishment, so close to the actual concern he ought to have been able to expect from his relatives. Harry blinked.

"I have no intention of dying," he said.

Maybe never, he thought to Voldemort. Over the past month, they had spoken many times about what it might mean to be a human horcrux, and whether he were still the Master of Death. It always pleased Voldemort to consider the prospect of eternity with his Harry.

Harry walked into the kitchen to rummage for a scrap of paper. "Look, if you ever need anything—if there's ever trouble from, you know, my world, write to me care of Tom the barman at the Leaky Cauldron. Here's the address."

The woman took it stiffly.

Please, just one little nightmare curse? Voldemort asked Harry as they stood once more at the door.

Absolutely not , said Harry, although Voldemort felt the smallest hint of wistfulness in it.

“Goodbye, Aunt Petunia.”

They heard the woman’s reply from behind them as Harry walked out the door.

“Goodbye…Harry.”

Harry paused for half a moment, shoulders tight, before walking on into the morning.

They were quiet on the passenger train to London. There had been plenty of time this past month to speak of Harry’s fears and ambitions for the year, at first in their shared dreams, and then, as Harry had learned to listen for Voldemort’s voice, in their waking hours as well. Now, they were content to simply share each other’s company. Shared space, shared body, shared soul. It was an impossible intimacy, and they had not begun to exhaust the wonder of it.

Now, as Harry holds court among the little snakes at the Welcome Feast—oh, he protests the framing, but Voldemort delights in how they already flock to his Harry—Voldemort is quiet again. It is enough to take in the sights and smells and tastes of the feast without the old veil between Harry’s senses and his experience of them.

Voldemort watches the professors at the Head Table try to puzzle out the mystery of a Slytherin Harry Potter. Severus looks like he’s swallowed one of Dumbledore’s lemon drops; Dumbledore looks like he’s seen Tom Riddle’s ghost. If only he knew that Tom Riddle’s spirit occupies not one but two of the people in this dining hall. Voldemort ardently anticipates the moment of revelation.

After the feast, two prefects come to lead the new Slytherins to the common room. When they give the password, the carved snakes on the door circle each other and hiss. Voldemort and Harry are the only

ones who hear it as anything but a wordless sibilance.

Welcome, say the snakes, and the door swings inward to let the students pass.

Harry's little snake starts to poke her head out of his sleeve, drawn by the sound of her own tongue. Harry covers his wrist loosely with his other hand, and she slithers back into his robes.

The prefects have just finished orienting their young charges when Severus swoops into the room, robes billowing dramatically behind him. Harry, who is standing towards the back of the group, notices him before most of the other students do. Severus meets Harry's eyes and raises a skeptical brow. It is an expression that might once have frozen young Harry in fear or raised his hackles for a fight, but Harry's emotions now are a mixture of amusement, resignation, and nostalgia. He does not look away.

"Thank you, Miss Farley," says Severus.

Several of the students flinch, not having seen him until now, but most of them manage to contain their reactions, as befits the House of subtlety.

"Welcome to Slytherin. You have found yourselves here… presumably…because you were judged to possess one or more of the qualities which this House values. I am Professor Snape, your Head of House.

"You may have already noticed that the other Houses will tend to view Slytherin through the lens of their own bias. We are ruthless. Untrustworthy. *Dark.* I choose to trust that you would not have been sent here if the Sorting Hat did not believe you equal to the challenge of rising above the prejudices of your peers—yes, and even your professors—to achieve your goals regardless of the obstacles.

"Outside these walls, Slytherin stands united. It is said that I favor my own House. I say that I provide only a necessary counterbalance to the other three-quarters of this institution. But I caution you not to mistake my public support for indifference to your behavior." His dark eyes fall on Harry and stay there. "I prefer to handle crimes and

punishments…in-House."

Poor Severus, to have the scope of all his considerable powers of mind and magic reduced to shepherding unruly children. He is even more unsuited to it than Voldemort himself, who still believes he could have been an excellent teacher if Dumbledore had ever given him the chance.

As he continues, Severus casts his glittering eyes on each of the first year students in turn, but he comes back to Harry more than any of them. "Reckless adventuring, mischief-making, and rule-breaking will not be tolerated under my watch. No matter what your name is."

It could be heard as a caution for the pureblood patricians like Malfoy not to rest on the power of their family names, but Harry and Voldemort know that it is just another way of saying, *Mr. Potter, our new…celebrity,* as he had in their first life together. It makes Voldemort want to teach Severus a lesson, but Harry is just trying not to smile. It's hard for his Harry, so full of love that he would embrace even his parents' murderer, to resent this man who is oath-sworn to protect him with his life.

Severus has noticed Harry exchanging a look with the Malfoy boy. "Mr. Potter. Is there anything you would like to say?"

"Erm, no thank you, sir."

Severus' eyes narrow, but he lets it go. "That will be all, Miss Farley. Please show the students to their dormitories. I will be distributing schedules at half seven tomorrow morning, so you had better not slink into breakfast at the last minute like a mob of Gryffindors."

The students all murmur a "yes, sir" before following Farley across the common room to the dormitory halls. Harry alone hangs back.

"Actually, Professor, there is something I need to talk to you about. Is there somewhere we could speak in private?"

No. Don't even think about it. You can't trust him with it.

How better to start earning his trust, than to offer him my own?

After glowering at Harry for a few seconds of silence, no doubt calculated to be as intimidating as possible to the eleven-year-old before him, Severus turns on his heel. “My office.”

Harry follows Severus through a door on the far side of the common room. A short corridor leads to another door. Severus lays his hand on it, and after a second, the wood glows under his hand, and the door swings open. He motions for Harry to precede him.

There’s not much room between Severus and the wall on the other side of the corridor, but Harry doesn’t need much room at this size. He slips through the door and finds himself in the familiar office where he’d suffered those Occlumency lessons in fifth year.

Be wary of unguarded eye contact, Voldemort warns.

I know.

Severus stalks over to sit sweepingly at the desk. “Have a seat, Mr. Potter.”

Harry takes one of the chairs facing the desk.

“I hope you are here, as it seems, to unburden your conscience with some sort of confession, not to waste my time with any complaints about your placement.”

What is it with you dark wizard types and saying everything in the most complicated way possible?

Wait until you meet Crabbe and Goyle’s fathers. Trust me, it is not a universal trait.

“I have no complaints about my placement, sir.” Harry looks down, suppressing a smile. “Plenty of people in that room tonight were surprised I went to Slytherin, but I wasn’t one of them.”

“Don’t tell me you *wanted* to be in Slytherin?” Severus’ voice is dripping with scorn.

Harry looks up. “I met Draco Malfoy on my first visit to Diagon Alley last month. My first time in the Wizarding world at all, really.

Whatever bias people usually have against Slytherin, I think I ended up with the opposite: I just knew that my first friend said his family have always been in Slytherin."

"And have you *met* his family, Mr. Potter?"

"I like his family, too."

More to himself than to Harry, Severus mutters, "If the Malfoys were a selling point for you, perhaps you *do* belong with the snakes."

"Funny you should mention snakes, sir, because that's actually what I wanted to talk to you about. I, erm, I might have brought an animal that wasn't listed in the letter."

" *Might* have? Do me the respect of saying what you mean, Mr. Potter."

Harry gently pats the pocket of his robes. "Hildegard, would you come out and say hello to Professor Snape, darling?"

The snake slithers up Harry's chest to poke her head out of the collar of his robes. Her flicking tongue tickles Harry's neck.

Hello, hisses the snake.

"And I suppose you think that volunteering this information will impress me so much that I will let you keep this creature in flagrant disregard for Hogwarts rules?"

Harry winces. "Does it help if I tell you a professor bought her for me?"

"Hagrid hardly counts. The man would raise a dragon if he thought he could get away with it."

And he definitely thinks he can get away with it, Harry thinks. "No, not Hagrid, sir. Professor Quirrell."

Severus looks darkly at the little snake. "Tell me, Mr. Potter," he says, his voice silky and dangerous, "Why would our Defense Against the Dark Arts professor buy you a snake?"

Harry takes a deep breath.

No, says Voldemort.

Trust me.

“He heard me talking to her in the shop, sir.”

Severus’ eyes fly up to meet Harry’s. “Impossible.”

The snake turns her head up to address Harry. *The big man does not smell stupid, Master. Why does he act like it?*

Harry smothers a laugh. *I told you about Professor Snape, Hildegard. He has a lot of complicated feelings about me. I guess I have some complicated feelings about him, too.* He holds out a hand for the snake to curl around as she pushes herself out of his robes. *But we’re trying very hard to impress him right now, so I’d appreciate it if you could be on your best behavior.*

Severus has gone very still. Of course, the last time he heard the language of serpents would have been from Voldemort himself. “Who else knows of this?”

Harry strokes his snake’s back with one finger. “About the snake? The other first year boys, and Pansy Parkinson.”

“You brought her out at dinner?”

“On the train, sir.”

“Did they hear you speak to her?”

“Not like this. Hildegard is very clever, she understands English quite well. Only Professor Quirrell knows about the Parseltongue. He advised me to be careful who I told—said a lot of people think it makes you evil to talk to snakes.”

“And yet you are telling me.”

Harry smiles crookedly. “I guess I decided I’d rather trust you than try to get one over on you.”

“Are you trying to manipulate me, Mr. Potter?”

“Is it manipulation if I mean it?”

“That is the most effective manipulation of all,” says Severus. He sighs. “I suppose you really do belong in Slytherin, Parselmouth or no.”

“And Hildegard?”

Severus observes the snake. “I will permit you to keep her in your dormitory or the common room *only*. If you wish to take her into the rest of the castle, we will have to involve the Headmaster.”

Harry’s heart speeds with triumph. “Does that mean we *don’t* have to involve the Headmaster if I keep Hildegard in Slytherin?”

“You don’t wish him to know of your ability?”

“I saw his face when I was Sorted, sir. He was…surprised.” Harry had almost said disappointed.

“We were all surprised, Mr. Potter.”

“Yes, but…you were worried I might not be a good fit for your House. Others are worried I might be some sort of dark lord in the making.”

“You are concerned that the Headmaster might be among these?”

“You said it yourself, sir. Slytherin has a reputation. I’m not afraid of it, but…don’t you think it would be smarter for me to be known for other things first?”

Voldemort recognizes the tightening around the corners of Severus’ eyes, a tell that he is trying not to smile. “I will give you the first term to make your impressions. But this is not a secret I will keep from the Headmaster indefinitely. You do realize that your ability is unlikely to have come to you in the usual way?”

“You mean, unless one of my parents was secretly descended from Salazar Slytherin?” Harry smiles.

Severus inclines his head.

“Thank you for trusting me, sir. I really appreciate it.”

“Do not make me regret it, Mr. Potter.”

That night, Harry and Voldemort find themselves in their cupboard as soon as they fall asleep, as they have now for many nights in a row. The cupboard is softer and wider than it was, more of a refuge than a prison. The broken toys on the ledges are slowly being replaced by objects of significance in their old lives: a golden snitch, Slytherin’s locket, the holly wand and the yew. The Deathly Hallows.

Voldemort, too, has changed. Under Harry’s loving attention, he grows less shriveled and shrunken by the day. His skin, though still mottled in places, is healing into the pale white smoothness he remembers from the night he’d joined with Harry. He is perhaps the size of an adult goblin, now: still smaller than nineteen-year-old Harry, but not embarrassingly so.

Soon, perhaps, he will be large enough to cushion Harry’s head on his own chest, for a change. For tonight, as Harry lies down on their little bed, Voldemort follows him down as he always does, laying his head over Harry’s heart. Harry’s arm comes around him to rest on his back, holding him close as always, as if Voldemort might disappear if he’s not careful. Voldemort will never leave his Harry again, but he understands the fear, because he feels it too.

Harry pulls up a blanket to cover them both and turns his face so his chin is resting on Voldemort’s naked head.

“That didn’t go too badly, did it.”

“You are a marvel, Harry Potter. To manipulate such an archetypal Slytherin so skillfully, while meaning every word…”

“Well, that’s why it worked, isn’t it? It’s like Snape said. He knew what I was doing, but I wasn’t pretending otherwise.”

“He could sense your trust for him. I imagine it means more to him

than he'd like it to, having the trust of Lily Potter's son. Even if he thinks it utterly unfounded."

"We'll chalk it up to my good instincts." Voldemort can feel Harry's smile. After a minute, Harry says, "Do you think it would have worked on you?"

Voldemort considers that. "You were able to offer Severus your unreserved trust because you already know that he is your sworn protector. We must necessarily be more wary of the other Voldemort, at least until we know that his desire for your death has been superseded by his interest in you."

"Aren't you the one who's been telling me that he just has to learn I'm his horcrux for him to get there?"

"Yes, but that's not the only thing you're thinking of, is it."

Voldemort feels Harry's breath hit his head in a warm puff. "No," Harry admits.

"You do have good instincts," Voldemort says into Harry's chest. "If you want to tell the other Voldemort about the time travel and the Hallows and all the rest of it, I will trust you."

"I just don't want him to find out after the fact that I've been stringing him along with partial information. If I trust him enough to work with him at all, I have to trust him with all of it." Harry is quiet for a minute, hand drawing patterns on Voldemort's back. "Well, maybe not the Hallows just yet."

Voldemort chuckles. "Perhaps not."

They fall asleep like that together, sleeping within sleep, shared souls pulsing in time with their hearts.

Notes for the Chapter:

> I have been so nourished and encouraged by the response to this story so far! Thank you for coming along with me.

School is starting back up this week, so I'll be a little busier with work - you can expect updates to take closer to two weeks than one, which will let me try to keep them consistent.

I'm also working on an alternate sequel oneshot to the sad-Harry prequel to this work, When the Weight is Gone. If you haven't read that, the concept is that once Harry boards Death's third train, he could end up anywhere - in his past, in an alternate universe, maybe even the future. I wanted an excuse to put my time travel Harry in infinite Situations.

So, keep an eye out for that story going up sometime this week. (You might want to subscribe to the series, not just this fic, if you want the email.)

7. 7. Make It Work

Summary for the Chapter:

Harry's first week of classes

Notes for the Chapter:

Apologies for the incomplete first attempt! I get so excited that sometimes I update from my phone, and then I make mistakes. Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa

“Okay, if you’re so great, you do it—
here’s the pencil, make it work…”

- “Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out,” Richard Siken

The first week passes in a blur of both novelty and nostalgia. Harry makes the acquaintance of the other Slytherins in his year: the quiet, elegant Daphne Greengrass; the quieter, broad-shouldered Millicent Bulstrode; and the mousy-haired Halfblood Tracey Davis, who seems determined to compensate for the shortcomings of her parentage by being the loudest voice in every room. She even gives Draco a run for his money.

Pansy gets along well enough with the girls but still spends most of her time with the boys. Just as Harry remembers, Draco is at the center of their little web of first-year Slytherins—only this time, Harry is right there with him.

The older Slytherins are more suspicious of Harry. Closer to the first war and less ready to default to Draco just for his name, they make it clear that Harry has not yet earned his place in Slytherin. They do nothing worse than ignoring him at meals or shooting him frosty glares in the common room, so Harry doesn’t waste much energy thinking about them.Though, sometimes he has to smother an

inappropriate snort when the horcrux in his head says something cutting about so-and-so's pathetic parents.

Classes are a delicate balance of holding back and showing off. He does want to impress and attract people, but he doesn't want to accidentally become known as a prodigy and then fail to deliver as a decidedly average adult.

Nothing about you is average, his Voldemort tells him.

That's very kind of you, but we both know I'm no Tom Riddle. I'm not even Hermione Granger, and she's just eleven. I have many talents, but none of them are academic.

Nonsense. You have only to apply yourself, my dear.

Harry doesn't feel much need to apply himself to first-year Charms or Transfiguration. The spells are so simple he could do them in his sleep. But the horcrux insists on real learning: he whispers to Harry in class, teaching him the theory behind all the elementary magic. When they are alone, he drills Harry on performing the spells wandlessly and wordlessly. Even History of Magic becomes marginally more interesting with Voldemort's running commentary.

On Tuesday night, the little band of Slytherins tramps up to the Astronomy Tower to look at the sky. Harry hasn't been up here since the night Dumbledore died. It's surreal to stand with his shoulder pressed against Draco's, their feet in much the same spot where Snape had cast the killing curse.

The castle is full of memories like this: here, Colin Creevey was found petrified; there, Professor McGonagall awoke the statues; here, the fake Moody turned Draco into a ferret, and that's where they laid out Fred Weasley's body. If he let himself, Harry could sink back into the grief of it, let it pull him under like it had at Remembrance Day.

But none of that has happened yet, nor ever need happen. The world has been made new…and so has Harry.

So when he sits down in the Defense classroom for his first class with Professor Quirrell, Harry tries not to think about all the things that

have happened in this room. Lockhart's pixies, the fake Moody's spiders, Dolores Umbridge issuing detentions with that simpering little cough…Patronus lessons with Lupin and mouthing off to Snape…Harry sets it all aside to focus his attention on the man now making his way to the front of the classroom.

The Slytherins, who have all been forewarned by Harry that there is more to Quirrell than meets the eye, or the ear, as it may be, are far more engaged than the Ravenclaws, who spend the period wrinkling their noses at the smell of garlic and reading ahead in their textbooks. But no one is as single-mindedly absorbed as Harry.

As soon as Quirrell had entered the room, Harry's scar started thrumming. It's exhilarating to be in such close proximity to the other Voldemort, but it's also frustrating because it's not as if Harry can speak to him.

You can speak to me, says the horcrux a bit sourly.

A fact I'm grateful for every day, don't get me wrong, replies Harry. *I'm just dying to know what he thinks about me.*

Lord deliver us from a schoolboy with a crush.

I'm not a schoolboy, I'm nineteen! And it's not a crush.

The voice in his head changes to sound like Harry's own. *Oh, I wonder what Voldemort is doing right now? Is he comfortable under that turban? Is he thinking about me? Does he think I'm smart and pretty and brave?*

Harry has to bury his face in his hands to keep from laughing.

"Are you alright?" Draco whispers from beside him.

Harry nods and drags his hands away from heated cheeks. He is relieved when class ends a few minutes later, saving him from any more uncomfortable thoughts about the precise nature of the pull he feels towards Voldemort.

"Mr. Potter?" stammers Quirrell before Harry can follow his friends into the corridor. "I wonder if I might have a word?"

Draco shoots Harry a look, which he waves off.

“I’ll catch you at dinner,” Harry says. He watches the last of the students file out of the classroom before he turns back to Quirrell. He feels oddly shy, after what the horcrux said.

“Well, Mr. Potter, how are you getting on?” Quirrell asks, stammering a little less than he had in class.

“Quite well, sir, thank you for asking.”

“Excellent. And Hildegard?”

Harry smiles. “You remembered!”

“Of course I did. I was so pleased to learn you found such an auspicious name for her. There hasn’t been any trouble?”

“No, sir. Professor Snape gave me permission to keep her as long as she stays in Slytherin for now. She’s become a sort of mascot for our dormitory.”

“I am glad to hear it. Although, I would very much have liked to see her again. I was going to invite the two of you to tea tomorrow afternoon in my office.”

Harry’s heart starts beating faster, which makes him feel a bit ridiculous. “Oh! I could probably sneak her up here, if you like. Only, I’m trying very hard to stay in Professor Snape’s good graces, and he says if I take her into the rest of the castle, he’ll have to tell the Headmaster I’m a Parselmouth.”

“Professor Snape knows you’re a Parselmouth?” Quirrell eyes him sharply.

“It’s how I convinced him about Hildegard. I could have just tried to keep her a secret, but I figured it’s better he should for him to hear it from me now than from some loose-lipped older student snooping for dirt on me.”

Quirrell frowns. “Are the older students causing problems for you?”

“Not really. They’re just more suspicious of me. I don’t blame really them, really—some of them are old enough to remember when the Dark Lord disappeared. It must have been a scary time for some of their families.”

A keen light flashes in Quirrell’s eyes. “I shouldn’t go calling him that outside of Slytherin, Mr. Potter.”

Harry cocks his head. “But you don’t mind, do you, Professor?” he asks innocently.

Flirt, says the horcrux. Harry fights a blush.

When Quirrell smiles, there’s an edge to it. “No, Mr. Potter, I don’t mind.”

Severus Snape has been anticipating this class with some ambivalence all week long: double Potions with the Gryffindors and his Slytherins, including Harry bloody Potter. Even though this is the group’s first class of the year, Potter has been inescapable all week. He’s all the other staff will talk about.

“Such a deft hand at Charms, dear Lily Evans was, and her son will be no different, mark my words!” said Filius at breakfast on Tuesday morning.

“The only reason he wasn’t first to turn his matchstick into a needle was that he was too busy helping his classmates get theirs,” offered Minerva. “Such a kind boy. Just like his parents.”

Severus kept any thoughts about that to himself.

The next day it was Pomona rhapsodizing about how quick Potter was to get elbow-deep in the dirt, as if there were any particular skill to it. The day after that, it was Aurora complimenting how very many constellations the boy already knew.

“Such an attentive student, even though I suspect he might have a slight fear of heights,” she’d said. “He was so tense when he first got up to the Tower, and I noticed he tried not to stand near the edge.”

James Potter's son ending up with a fear of heights would be a more satisfying justice than Severus had come to expect of the universe, but he kept his doubts to himself.

Albus was feeling quite pleased about the whole thing. Privately he confided to Severus that he'd been a little concerned when Harry had Sorted Slytherin. "Wasn't sure it would be the best fit for him, you know, there's still so much unfortunate sentiment among some of those old families, but I'm more than happy to be wrong. How has he been settling in?"

"He is already quite friendly with his yearmates, as you have seen."

"Yes, yes, delightful to see them all getting on so well. I confess I had worried they might be a poor influence on him, but it seems just as likely now that any influence might go the other way round. There is something quite irrepressible about our young Mr. Potter, wouldn't you say, Severus?"

"Indeed."

Severus had been dreading the advent of Harry Potter's Hogwarts career for years, now. He'd felt all his conjectures confirmed when the boy had filed into the Great Hall in a great queue of first years—how very like his father he was. Then the Sorting Hat had placed the boy in Slytherin. If it hadn't been so horrifying, it might have been funny: James Potter's spawn, a snake. Severus felt certain there must have been some mistake.

He'd swooped down on the common room that first night braced for a standoff—one he would win, naturally, since unlike his father, this Potter was less than half Severus' age, and friendless, besides. Except that he wasn't friendless, tied at the hip as he already was to young Draco, and he carried himself with an uncanny maturity that belied his years.

To his surprise, Severus had found himself actually enjoying their conversation. The young Potter had been witty yet respectful, refusing to be either intimidated or provoked. It was in this steadfast cheerfulness that he most resembled his mother. It reminded Severus of the early days, before everything went to shit.

The Parseltongue was concerning; Albus would need to be told eventually. But Severus feels inclined to nurture and protect the boy's ambitions to be known first for something better than a relic of an old tyrant.

Still, if Severus Snape has found Harry Potter somewhat more tolerable than he'd expected, he is still taking the boy's measure, and he has no intention of going easy on him. So with that in mind, he readies a series of difficult but not impossible questions designed to ascertain whether a student has bothered to crack open a textbook before reaching Hogwarts. He does not wish to humiliate the boy, exactly, but maybe to humble him, and to remind everyone who is the Potions Master, and who the students.

The Slytherins, already familiar with the dungeons, are the first to arrive. They enter in pairs, having perhaps heard from some older students how to prepare themselves for Professor Snape's class: Greengrass and Parkinson, Bulstrode and Davis, Crabbe and Goyle, Nott and Zabini. Potter brings up the rear, head close together with Draco's as the boys whisper together. Potter looks up as he passes the wide teacher's desk.

"Good morning, Professor," he says cheerfully.

"Hello, Uncle—Professor," Draco echoes.

"Just Professor will suffice in this classroom, Mr. Malfoy."

"Sorry, sir!"

The boys situate themselves at a front table. The Gryffindors have started to arrive now. A bushy-haired girl flounces over to the table beside Potter. A dumpy-looking boy follows nervously in her wake.

"Hello, Harry!" the girl says. With her brisk, somewhat imperious attitude, Severus notes the sneers that come not only from his snakes but from some of her fellow lions as well.

Severus watches Potter closely for his reaction, curious to see if the boy shares his classmates' feelings. Nothing could be further from the truth. Potter's face breaks into an easy smile, and his posture opens

towards the girl.

“Hermione! How’d it go last night?” Without waiting for an answer, he waves at the boy slumping into the next seat over. “Hi, Neville.”

Ah, that must be the Longbottom boy. “Hello, Harry,” he mumbles as the girl launches into her reply.

“I think I finally got it! And I found several more volumes that ought to shed some light on the theory and history, and then there’s the practical implications, of course, and—well, I’ll just have to show you. Will you be in the library after lunch?”

“No, I’m having tea with Professor Quirrell this afternoon. You’ll have to tell me tomorrow.”

Is he indeed? That is an unusual intimacy for a professor to pursue with a student. Severus is often obliged to conduct private conferences in his office, of course, but that is a function of being Head of Slytherin. Quirinus Quirrell holds no such position. Severus resolves to keep a closer eye on the man. Potter seems to trust him, but then Potter seems like a generally open and trusting sort—befriender of Malfoys and Muggleborns alike. It will not do to allow his easy nature to be taken advantage of in some way.

When his clock silently strikes the hour, Severus stands. A hush falls over the classroom, Slytherin side first.

“You are here to learn the subtle science and exact art of potion making,” he begins. Potter’s eyes are bright, with some unreadable expression on his face.

“As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don’t expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses…I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death—if you aren’t as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach.”

The bushy-haired Gryffindor squirms in her seat, no doubt resenting

that she's been lumped in with the likes of Longbottom, who is staring at Severus with something approaching terror. Potter has a strangely distant look in his eye; although he's looking straight ahead, it's as if he's hardly seeing Severus at all. Severus feels the sudden impulse to wrench him back to reality.

"Potter!" he barks.

The boy blinks. When his eyes resettle on Severus, he looks marginally more alert. Good.

"What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

The boy's eyes go a bit fuzzy again, and he almost seems to smile to himself. "Draught of Living Death, sir."

Severus is surprised, but not as violently as he might have been before that illuminating tete-a-tete with Potter on Sunday night. "Very good, Potter. Five points to Slytherin for reading ahead."

He sweeps his gaze over the sea of students. The bushy-haired Gryffindor girl is looking like she'd very much like a go at proving herself, so Severus ignores her. The Slytherins are grinning and nodding at Potter for scoring points. Draco is whispering something in Potter's ear, which annoys Severus enough that he decides to test his godson's mettle next.

"Mr. Malfoy, where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Draco bites his lip. "In the cupboard, I suppose." Nervous laughter breaks out behind him, then quiets under Severus' stern glare. "It's an antidote, I know that much, only I'm not sure where it comes from."

A hideous bleating noise comes from Potter. The class erupts in laughter again. Severus turns his eviscerating glare at Potter, who cringes.

"Sorry, I was just trying to give Draco a hint."

"Of what, a dying frog?" whispers the Nott boy to his companion.

“Mr. Malfoy, two points to Slytherin for only being partially ignorant. Unfortunately, Mr. Potter, I must take five points from Slytherin for your disruptive attempt to wrest attention back to yourself.”

Potter blushes and ducks his head. The Slytherins groan.

The Gryffindor girl’s hand is waving frantically again. Severus rolls his eyes. “Miss…”

“Granger, sir.”

“Miss Granger, if you were hoping to inform us that a bezoar may be found in the stomach of a goat, you may save your breath.” The girl deflates. “However, I will allow you to explain to us the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane.”

A bit breathlessly, she says at once, “They’re the same plant, sir. Also known as aconite.”

“Indeed.” Severus turns with a sweep of his robes and spells today’s page numbers up on the chalkboard.

Behind him, he hears the beginnings of a protest from Granger die out under Potter’s hushed warning. “Forget the points,” he says, “you’ll only make it worse.”

The class is no better or worse than expected, which is to say, most of the boil-curing potions are utterly useless, but no one ends up in the Hospital Wing. There’s a close call when Longbottom nearly adds his porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire, but the Granger girl stays his hand just in time.

“One point to Gryffindor,” Severus tells her quietly, “for a crisis averted.”

The girl preens, and he nearly takes the point back.

Only Potter and Draco manage to produce a perfect potion. Severus returns five points to Slytherin for the accomplishment, congratulating himself on managing to secure at least two students for his own House who may not be wholly incompetent by the time he’s done with them.

He holds Potter after class.

“I’m sorry I was such an arse today, sir,” the boy offers immediately, those haunting green eyes obnoxiously earnest.

“Don’t tempt me to revoke even more points for self-flagellation.”

Potter smiles sheepishly, and Severus finds himself reluctantly softening. “You cannot always be rescuing your friends from the consequences of their own foolishness, Potter.”

“Are you accusing me of a savior complex just because I tried to give Draco a hint?”

“I heard you warn Granger off, as well.”

“Sorry, did you *want* her to fight you?”

“Are you accusing me of picking fights with eleven-year-olds just because I wish you to learn from your own mistakes?”

Potter’s mouth twitches. “Merlin forbid.”

After a beat of silence, Severus finally gets to the subject he’d held Potter back to discuss. “You and Granger seem quite friendly already.”

“We met on the train.”

“And again in the library, apparently.”

“Is this some sort of intervention?”

“I am simply expressing my surprise. It is not often that one of my Slytherins befriends a Gryffindor, and a Muggleborn to boot.”

“My mother was a Gryffindor Muggleborn,” says Potter, looking down.

“She was,” agrees Severus. He is careful to keep his voice impassive.

“I don’t care about all that.” Potter looks up again, eyes blazing. “Blood status and House rivalries. I’m here to become the best wizard

I can be, and so is Hermione. Why should anything else matter?"

"I wager it matters to your friends."

"My friends and I have already established that they don't get to tell me who I'm allowed to talk to. I hope that's not what you're trying to do. Sir."

Severus finds the boy's passion endearing, if a bit saccharine. "On the contrary. Your instincts are commendable." He frowns. "Though if you dare repeat that, I will deny it."

Potter's shoulders lose some of their tightness. "Of course."

"If you will hear my counsel, however, I'd caution you to be careful—for Miss Granger's sake as much as for yours. If you cannot commit to a friendship even in the face of great temptation or opposition, it would be better not to begin one at all." Severus fears he's revealed too much of himself, but of course there's no way Potter has any inkling what he's talking about.

The boy's eyes look frighteningly understanding, though. Not for the first time, he gives Severus the unsettling impression that he sees far more than he ought.

"I am not so easily moved," he says quietly.

"I am beginning to see that, Mr. Potter."

Quirrell's wards tell Voldemort that Potter has been pacing outside the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom for seven minutes now. He smiles to himself under the foul-smelling turban. It's sweet, the boy's nerves so near the surface. But what does he have to be nervous about? Quirrell is hardly the sort of person to inspire fear in others. Does Potter's interest in Quirrell signify that he sees more to the man than his apparent meekness?

Of course, Voldemort has allowed Quirrell to gradually suggest his truer self to Potter. At times he has been hard pressed not to possess Quirrell utterly, that he might speak directly with the boy. But his

host weakens daily; such a thing might kill the man, and Voldemort cannot risk his loss until the Philosopher's Stone is secure.

It is to satisfy some of his curiosity that he invited Potter here. What threads of fate connect them? Is the boy merely starved of adult approbation, or is he drawn to something beyond Quirrell, though he understand it not?

As the clock turns three, Potter's footsteps cross the classroom and a knock finally sounds on the door of Quirrell's office.

"Come in!" calls Quirrell haltingly.

"Hello, Professor," Potter says as he comes in, tucking his hands in his robe pockets. "Thanks for having me."

"So glad you could make it." Quirrell flicks his wand at a teapot on the small counter, and it starts to heat up. "Pity about Hildegard, but of course, I understand."

"Oh, er, actually," the boy begins, but before he can rally himself to explain in words, a little white head pokes out from his pocket.

Aren't you going to introduce me?

Cheeky girl, hisses the boy. In English, he says, "Hildegard, you remember Professor Quirrell, he bought you for me at the pet shop. Professor, allow me to officially introduce Hildegard of Hogwarts."

Potter brings his hand out, Hildegard coiled around his wrist. She raises her head and tastes the air with her tongue.

"Pleased to see you again," Quirrell stammers.

Master, why does this one pretend to be afraid? He does not smell of fear.

Potter blushes, embarrassed as if the snake's words might be intelligible to more than just himself. Of course, Voldemort understands every word, but Potter can't know that.

Don't be rude, darling, he hisses quietly, stroking the little snake's smooth back.

“I am glad to see the threat of Professor Snape’s reprisals did not keep you from bringing her,” Quirrell ventures.

Potter grins. “Hildegard can be very sneaky, and so can I.”

“After all, you are both snakes.”

Potter seems pleased at the comparison. “I suppose we are.”

The teapot whistles, and Quirrell turns around to add the tea leaves and pour two steaming cups. “Two sugars?”

“You remembered,” says Potter, surprised.

Quirrell shoots him a slanting look. “Ravenclaw.”

“Right.” Potter accepts one of the teacups from Quirrell. “Thank you.”

“So what do you make of Professor Snape?” Quirrell stammers at Voldemort’s suggestion. “Are you getting on?”

“He’s quite brilliant, of course. A little less impressed by me than the other teachers, which is sort of refreshing, honestly.”

Quirrell laughs. “I thought you wanted to be impressive.”

“Not for losing my parents and accidentally vanishing a Dark Lord when I was a boy. I want to make my own name.”

Quirrell hesitates, but Voldemort gives him a mental nudge to follow his instincts and pursue that thread. “I imagine your Dark Lord felt similarly.”

Potter’s cheeks flush crimson. “Is he *my* Dark Lord?”

“You have more of a claim to him than many,” Quirrell says, stammering a little less. “Certainly more than those admirers bowled over by your celebrity.”

“Do I?” Potter studies Quirrell, and not for the first time, Voldemort has the impression that the boy is looking through Quirrell to

himself. His luminous green eyes are both penetrating and faraway, like a Seer in the throes of a prophecy. “I wonder what he’d think about that.”

“Would you speak with him, if you could?” Voldemort is feeding Quirrell the words to say now, speaking to the boy as directly as he can.

“If I could be reasonably sure I’d survive the encounter,” says Potter after half a minute, “yeah, I’d speak with him.”

The snake winds up Potter’s arm until she’s wrapping herself loosely around his neck, a lovely dappled collar. *What would you say?* she asks the boy, red tongue tickling his ear.

He doesn’t answer right away. Quirrell just watches, with Voldemort poised at the back of his eyes and ears, hungry to hear what Harry Potter would say to him if he could.

When he does answer, it’s in Parseltongue, thinking only his snake can hear it. *I guess I’d tell him I feel connected to him, even though we’ve never really met. I’d show him my wand, and ask to see his, maybe. I’d ask him if he still wants me dead, and if there’s any way he might be persuaded to reconsider. I’d ask if he feels drawn to me like I’m drawn to him.*

If Voldemort had breath of his own, it would catch in his throat. He feels a sudden stab of possessiveness, an urge at once both violent and tender. He wants to lock the door and never let the boy leave his sight, or better yet, to float out of Quirrell and sink into Potter instead, to bind his flesh and body and will forevermore.

Quirrell senses some of his master’s agitation, but of course he doesn’t know the reason for it and must sit there impassively as the snake replies to Potter.

He won’t kill you. If he tries to hurt you, I will bite him.

You can’t bite the Dark Lord, Potter says, laughing.

“I imagine the Dark Lord would find you as fascinating as I do, Mr. Potter,” says Quirrell.

The boy smiles, almost coyly. “You like my chances, then?”

It is tempting to reveal himself now and test just how theoretical Potter’s interest in him might be, but Voldemort is a patient man. Ten years he has already waited to revenge himself on this child who had been his destruction; he can wait a few weeks more to be quite certain of his allegiances before taking any step that cannot be undone.

Voldemort simply directs Quirrell to say, “I like your chances quite well, Mr. Potter.”

Potter thanks him for the tea, and Quirrell secures his promise to come again the next week. “But perhaps you had better leave Hildegard behind—no sense tempting fate when it comes to the wrath of Severus Snape.”

“Or the suspicion of Albus Dumbledore, I reckon,” says Potter over his shoulder as he reaches the door, eyes glittering with some hidden humor.

How is it possible that his mortal enemy be constructed with such perfection? Voldemort turns the puzzle of him over in his mind for some time after the boy leaves, long after Quirrell finishes fiddling with the tea things and sits down to rest again.

Harry Potter will be his one way or another. The only question now is how.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Thanks for your patience waiting for this new chapter! If you missed it, I was busy writing an AU in which my time travel Harry wakes up as Voldemort's captive in an alternate present instead of going back in his past as he does in Do It Over. He's having a great time.
>
> The fic is called The Stubborn Hunger. Check it out by clicking "next work" on this series!

8. 8. So I'm the Dragon

Summary for the Chapter:

Draco and Harry are having a great time.

“Okay, so I’m the dragon. Big deal.
You still get to be the hero.”

-”Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out,” Richard Siken

At the beginning of the second week of school, a notice appears on the bulletin board in the Slytherin common room: flying lessons start on Thursday. Draco is the first to notice it.

“Harry, look!” he says, grabbing Harry's elbow. “We'll have to use the school brooms, of course, but still. We can finally fly together!”

Pansy groans when she reads the flyer. “Why do we have to be with the Gryffindors, though? I swear, if I have to listen to Granger declaim on the history of broomsticks, I'll hex her hair off.”

“Might be a mercy,” says Blaise as he comes up behind them.

“Hermione talks a lot when she's nervous, she's hardly alone in that,” says Harry mildly.

“She *always* talks a lot,” Pansy complains.

“Hardly alone in that either,” says Harry.

“Merlin. I'm not fighting about Hermione Granger before I've had my breakfast,” Draco announces, and that settles it. They head off to the Great Hall still buzzing with the excitement of flying lessons, which not even the Gryffindors can ruin for them.

They’ve been at Hogwarts for one full week now. A different sort of only child might be overwhelmed, going from solitary tutors and only a parent or two for company to the constant hubbub of Hogwarts life

—Theo, for instance, seems to be coping by disappearing into the library for hours every evening—but Draco feels like he's in heaven. He's had a charmed childhood, he knows, but it was lonely, for all its luxury. He hadn't realized how much until he'd met Harry.

From that first conversation in Madame Malkins, Draco has felt like he's finally found a friend who sees him exactly as he is and likes him anyway. With Harry, Draco can be as cutting as he likes; when it's too far, Harry simply tells him so, and Draco is learning to be less afraid of scaring his new friend away by accidentally being too awful.

Harry is a safe place for Draco's earnestness, too. Draco knows that he is a hard exterior with a soft underbelly, like the dragons he's named for. He has always been ashamed of his softness: Father expects him to be strong, a Malfoy walking through the world unbending, but Draco has found that he craves approval more than power. His father's, his friends'...Harry Potter's. Only, Harry makes Draco feel like he already has it, even when he's a bit of an ass.

At Hogwarts, Draco is never alone unless he wants to be, and he never really wants to be. He sits with Harry in every class and at every meal, the two of them at the center of their little group—mostly the seven of them from the train. Sometimes the other girls join them, and other times Crabbe and Goyle prefer the company of Bulstrode and Davis, who have less of a tendency to run circles around them with lightning-fast conversation.

It's not that anyone *means* to leave them out, and actually, Harry's a lot better about looking out for them than Draco's ever been. It's just that the core group of them—Draco, Harry, Theo, Blaise, and Pansy—are young and clever and probably all a little bit in love with each other, because it's like being in love with themselves.

When they're not in class or in the Great Hall for meals, Theo is usually off recovering from all the socialization. Harry has been splitting his evenings between exploring the castle and grounds with the Slytherins and studying in the library with Granger. Harry's friendship with the Gryffindor girl still bothers Draco for Harry's sake, but since Harry's always back in the common room to gossip with them by the fire for an hour or two before bed, often with Hildegard taking turns playing with each of them, he's no longer so

afraid that Granger is going to steal Harry away from them.

Harry is just about the kindest person Draco has ever met, and somehow that includes a Gryffindor Muggleborn as much as Draco and his friends.

Breakfast is Draco's favorite meal of the day because it's when the mail comes. Last week, he'd written to his parents about the Sorting, and they'd sent Ulysses back with green and silver cashmere scarves for him and Harry so quickly that they must already have had them ready to go. Harry had been so touched by the gift that he'd written back immediately, and now he and Mother are well on their way to a regular correspondence.

Draco loves that Harry is getting on with his parents. He lets himself dream about bringing Harry home to live with them forever. Is this what it's like to have a brother? Draco wants to be with Harry all the time. He wants to share his home and his parents and his whole life with him. He wants to make those Muggles pay for how they've treated the best person Draco has ever known, except that Harry wouldn't want him to. Because he's the best person Draco has ever known.

On Thursday, Ulysses soars over to the breakfast table bearing an enormous package of gourmet chocolates addressed to both him and Harry. Draco would prefer to hoard the sweets for themselves—they're not likely to get another package for at least a week—but when Harry starts handing out his share freely, Draco decides he'll look miserly if he doesn't do the same. So he swallows his ill grace and hands over his least favorite truffles to Crabbe and Goyle, who fall upon them eagerly.

On their way out of breakfast, they see Longbottom opening a small, round package to reveal a sphere that Draco recognizes as a Remembrall. They're a bit of a gimmick; Goyle had one for a few years, Draco remembers, until his big brother destroyed it on a lark.

The Remembrall turns red in Longbottom's hand. Draco snatches it. "Forgotten something, Longbottom?" Draco exchanges a look with Pansy, and they both laugh. In his hand, the Remembrall turns white again.

When Draco tosses the ball into the air, Harry grabs it with Seeker-fast reflexes. Born to play Quidditch, their Harry.

“What is it?” Harry asks, turning the cloudy ball over in his hand before handing it back to Longbottom.

“Thanks, Harry,” Longbottom says. Weasley is glaring at Draco, but Longbottom ignores him, all his focus on Harry.

The little sphere is turning red again in Longbottom’s hand. “It’s a Remembrall,” he explains to Harry. “It tells you if you’ve forgotten something.”

“But not what you’ve forgotten? Not sure how helpful that is,” says Harry.

Goyle, coming up behind them with Crabbe and Bulstrode, grunts his assent. “Mine just gave me anxiety. I was glad my brother smashed it.”

Longbottom turns wide eyes on Goyle. “What do you do when you forget things?”

Goyle shrugs. “Between me an’ Crabbe, we get most of the important stuff, anyway. Not like the world’s gonna end if I miss a password, is it.”

“Tell that to my gran,” says Longbottom glumly.

“Is she related to my mum?” says Goyle, chuckling.

Draco visualizes the family trees he’s pored over all his life. “Actually, I think they’re second cousins. Once removed.”

“It’s scary that you know that,” Harry tells Draco with a laugh.

“Well, thanks, Goyle,” says Longbottom. He’s looking up at all of them through unfairly thick eyelashes like he’s just made a new friend or two. Something about it makes Draco want to grab the Remembrall and smash it on the floor. “I guess I’ll see you in Potions tomorrow?”

“You’ll see me sooner than that, cousin,” says Goyle. Draco knows he’s poking fun at Longbottom, but it doesn’t come out as mean as it might have. Maybe Harry is a restraining influence on all of them.

Longbottom looks confused, like he’s not sure if he’s been threatened or not.

“We’ve got flying lessons with you lot this afternoon,” says Harry.

Longbottom’s look of confusion melts into something more like misery. “Don’t remind me!”

“Have you never been on a broom?” Draco demands, incredulous.

“I don’t think brooms agree with me,” says Longbottom.

“It won’t be so bad, Neville,” says Harry. “Just try not to freak yourself out too much ahead of time.”

“The brooms can sense fear, you know,” says Draco, who still has the urge to poke at this boy’s weakness until he cracks along the fault lines.

“Like Snape!” crows Weasley. The Gryffindors all laugh.

The Slytherins scowl. Except Harry, who can’t help but crack a smile. “Draco’s not wrong,” Harry tells Longbottom. “The best approach to both might be to pretend you feel confident until it starts to be true.”

“Fake it till you make it,” says the dark-skinned boy across from Weasley. Draco forgets his name; it’s not one he’d recognized.

“Exactly!” says Harry. “Well, we’d best be off to Transfiguration. See you down on the pitch.”

“See you, Harry,” says Neville with a nervous nod to the rest of them.

As they’re leaving the Great Hall, they find their way blocked by Marcus Flint and a few of his oversized cronies with more brawn than brain, Adrian Pucey and Miles Bletchley from the Slytherin Quidditch team. Flint plants himself directly in front of Harry, but it’s Draco he scowls down at first.

“Does your father know you’re swanning around with Mudbloods, Malfoy?”

“My father doesn’t answer to you, Flint, and neither do I,” says Draco. Crabbe and Goyle come up on either side of him and Harry, a mirror in miniature of the older Slytherins facing them. “Get out of my way.”

“No.” Flint and his friends laugh unkindly. “Some of us still care about the dignity of our House. It’s bad enough that blasted Hat lets Halfbloods into Slytherin; now we’re supposed to share air with Harry bloody Potter?”

“I wasn’t aware the old families had a monopoly on cunning and ambition,” says Harry.

Draco wishes Harry would leave this to him—he may be half Flint’s size, but he is a Malfoy. What is a Flint to that? But Harry is already glaring up at Flint like he’s ready to draw wands.

“As if a Muggle-raised mutt has any right to tell us what Slytherin is,” sniffs Flint, with only a brief disdainful glance at Harry before he fixes his glare again on Draco.

“Is there a problem, gentlemen?” McGonagall is bearing down on them with quick clipped steps, faster than anyone as old as she is has any right to move. Draco sees Uncle Severus watching from the head table with narrowed eyes.

“Not at all, Professor. Flint was just moving,” says Draco imperiously. He feels a savage flush or satisfaction when, after a threatening eyebrow from McGonagall, Flint is forced to do just that.

Flint checks Draco’s shoulder with his massive chest as they push past. “This isn’t over, Malfoy,” he mutters.

Harry rolls his eyes at Flint and takes Draco by the sleeve to drag him along. “He’s not worth it, come on.”

Draco can’t help but look back at Flint as they go. His mouth is curled into an ugly sneer, and he’s glaring at Harry as if he could shoot Unforgivables out of his eyes. No, it’s definitely not over.

After Transfiguration, McGonagall asks if she can have a word with Harry. Draco has not been asked, but he remains at Harry's elbow anyway, as if daring her to send him away.

"Mr. Malfoy," she begins, but Harry interrupts her.

"Is it alright if Draco stays, Professor? It's just…I don't know that any of us ought to be wandering the halls alone just now. Not until Flint cools off a bit."

"Hogwarts is your home, Mr. Potter. You should never feel unsafe here."

Harry gives a little cough. McGonagall narrows her eyes. "Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

"If Flint is a problem, ma'am, I think Professor Snape would want to be the one to deal with it," says Harry.

"Hm. Given you that old speech about handling problems in-House, has he?"

Draco starts to bristle, but McGonagall heads him off before he can say anything foolish. "No need to get offended on your Head of House's behalf, Mr. Malfoy. Severus is a colleague and, I daresay, a friend, though he'd likely deny it if you asked. I acknowledge him more than capable of handling his own disciplinary issues."

Harry is smiling. He looks sort of fond, which is odd, because he doesn't know McGonagall any better than Draco does.

"At any rate, I didn't keep you here just to talk about Marcus Flint. I wanted to see how you're getting on in general, Mr. Potter."

"Quite well, Professor. What you saw this morning—there really hasn't been much of that at all."

"I am glad to hear it. We were all a bit surprised when you went to Slytherin. I had both of your parents in Gryffindor, you know." Harry nods. "Nothing but trouble, your father was, though he grew up very

fine in the end." The old bird looks a bit misty-eyed. "If Slytherin is treating you well, I am happy for it."

"Most of us have better sense than Marcus Flint, Professor," says Draco. "We're proud to have Harry."

McGonagall arches an eyebrow at Draco, but he can tell she wants to smile. "I can see that, Mr. Malfoy. The two of you will hardly be separated." She looks back to Harry. "I realize I am not your Head of House, Mr. Potter, but I want you to know that you may come to me for any reason, at any time. I think your parents would want to know that you have as many of us as possible looking out for you."

"Thank you, Professor, that's very kind," says Harry with a soft, sad sort of look on his face. "I think…if things had gone a bit differently, I might have been very happy in Gryffindor. I almost feel I ought to apologize that I'm Professor Snape's headache instead."

McGonagall finally cracks a smile. "Keep on as you are, Mr. Potter, and you will owe me no apologies. Do not think it escaped my notice that Mr. Flint took his stand after he saw you and your companions being friendly with some of my Gryffindors, or that I do not see that you are a better friend to our Miss Granger than many in her own house have yet learned to be.

"You are your parents' son, Harry, whatever colors you wear. They would have been very proud of you."

Now it's Harry who looks about to cry. "Thank you, Professor."

When McGonagall dismisses them, Draco and Harry head down to the library for their free period. Harry is quieter than usual, subdued even through lunch and Charms. He gets like this sometimes: his eyes go all faraway, like he's only half there with them. Sometimes, it happens after studying with Granger, and the worst was on Saturday when he came back up from having tea with the gamekeeper.

Draco can only guess that something about the Gryffindors makes Harry think about his dead parents and the other life he might have had. He's glad McGonagall said that thing about Harry's parents because sometimes Harry will just look so sad and almost guilty that

Draco worries he feels funny about being in Slytherin with him, or at least feels like he ought to feel funny about it.

Draco feels bad that Harry had to grow up with his wretched Muggles instead of wizarding parents who loved him, of course, but he can't quite bring himself to regret the circumstances that have made Harry his and not Granger's, Snape's and not McGonagall's. Maybe even… well, not Dumbledore's, certainly. If Harry had grown up in a happy Gryffindor family, it would all be different, wouldn't it?

Harry's melancholy has worn off by the time they're all heading down to the Quidditch pitch for flying lessons. Draco is glad enough to have his friend back to normal that he lets himself be led over to the Gryffindors, where Harry sets himself up beside Longbottom and Granger.

Weasley wrinkles his nose when he sees Draco approach—at least someone else besides Marcus Flint remembers the natural order of things, Draco thinks wistfully—but then Longbottom is saying, "You've met Harry, haven't you, Ron?" and Weasley is stepping over to shake Harry's outstretched hand, and it's all so chummy that Draco starts to wonder if Flint doesn't have a point. Not that he isn't an arse about it, or has any right to call out a Malfoy.

Madame Hooch interrupts Harry's Gryffindor party, calling out as she strides onto the field, "Well, what are you all waiting for? Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

The last few stragglers find their places. Draco looks down at the raggedy old school broom at his feet and thinks longingly of the gleaming new Nimbus 2000 lying hidden in his trunk.

"Stick out your wand hand over your broom," yells Hooch, facing the rows of robes trimmed in green and red, "and say, 'Up!'"

"Up!" Draco says, along with everyone else, and the broom smacks into his palm at once.

Harry hadn't actually had to say the word; he just opened his hand, and the broom obeyed. He wasn't even looking at it, his attention fixed instead on the struggling Gryffindors. Granger's broom had

rolled a little, while Longbottom's hadn't budged an inch. Weasley gets his on the second try, mumbling something about how the brooms at home are more comfortable with him.

"How did you *do* that, Harry?" groans Longbottom.

"You can't wonder if it's going to happen or not," says Harry. "You have to tell the broom what you want and expect it to listen. Because you're the wizard, and it's just a ratty old broom."

"I'm the wizard, and you're just a broom," Longbottom tells the broom under his breath, over and over until he sounds marginally more sure of himself.

"I'm being very insistent, Harry, I promise you that," complains Granger.

"Maybe try relaxing a bit?" suggests Harry. "Feel where you want it to smack into your hand, and then just…coax it."

"But that's the opposite of what you told Neville!"

"Well, you're having opposite difficulties, aren't you," says Harry.

Miraculously, both Granger and Longbottom manage to get their brooms in hand before Hooch makes her way around to their side of the field. "Very good, everyone. Five points to Gryffindor."

Draco's mouth drops open in outrage as Weasley grins.

"But that was all Harry!" Draco says.

"Then Harry can have the moral victory, and we'll take the points!" says Granger, laughing. "Lord knows Harry doesn't need any more points."

It's true that Harry tends to win points in every class, even though he's never trying to draw attention to himself. He's just too much of a natural. The teachers, most of them already primed to love him because he's Harry Potter, love him now for being clever and kind—because, after all, he's always helping people like he's just helped Granger and Longbottom. He's like a little teacher. The only

professors who seem immune to it are Binns, because of the whole being dead thing, and Uncle Severus, but even he will sometimes look at Harry like he's trying to figure out how he's even possible.

Draco is of two minds about it. On the one hand, he quite agrees with everyone who adores Harry. The few who don't, like Marcus Flint and his gang, have little taste and less sense. On the other hand, Draco hates feeling like he has to share Harry with the world. It's not so bad when it's just their friends in Slytherin and a few teachers like Quirrell and Uncle Severus. When it's everyone, it almost feels like Harry doesn't belong to Draco anymore, like he's some sort of common property.

Draco tries to hide the ugliest of these feelings from Harry. He knows Harry doesn't think of himself as a limited resource. "I can like both of you at once," he's said before when Draco has needled him about Granger. But Draco can't help feeling it anyway.

Now that most everyone has a broom in hand, Hooch tells them to mount up. She walks down the rows of students correcting stances and adjusting grips. Draco is holding his broom the way he always has, but when he looks to his right, he sees Harry with his hands the other way round. Harry has flown all the way from London to Surrey on his broom, so whatever he's doing must work. Draco switches his hands.

Madame Hooch has no adjustments for their little corner. Even Longbottom is just copying Harry, so he looks good enough.

Hooch addresses the whole group. "Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard. Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet, and then come straight back down by leaning forward slightly. On my whistle—three—two—"

Longbottom's self-control must only extend so far, because he's already kicked off and zoomed straight up into the sky before Hooch even calls three.

"Come back, boy!" Hooch yells, but it doesn't look like Longbottom could manage it even if he heard her. He's spiraling straight up, higher than the Quidditch goals, clinging to the broom for dear life as

he lists dangerously to one side.

Before Hooch is even done yelling, Harry has kicked off and sped after Longbottom like a Seeker who's spotted a very large Snitch. Up, up, up he flies, pulling up hard as he comes level with Longbottom. Harry puts a steadying hand on the other boy's broom, and Longbottom is able to right himself. It looks like Harry is talking him through it.

Keeping his hand on Longbottom's broom, Harry guides them both down to the ground in a gentle spiral. As soon as he can, Longbottom climbs off shakily. The broom falls back to the grass.

Hooch is storming over to the two boys. "Of all the reckless, irresponsible, arrogant—you could have been killed!" It's not clear which one of them she's talking to. Maybe both in turns.

"Neville didn't mean to, ma'am," says Harry.

"Maybe not, but you certainly did, Mr. Potter! What were you thinking?"

"I suppose I was thinking that Neville might have died," Harry says, and Draco hears the edge to it.

Madame Hooch does, too, because she bristles and sends them both to the stands. "No more flying today, for either of you! Five points from each!"

Harry marches over to the stands with his head high, not a whiff of regret on him. Longbottom follows with his shoulders slumped.

Weasley gives Harry a nod as he passes, which Harry returns with a happy smile. Merlin knows why Harry wants to befriend that ginger buffoon so badly, but he does. Draco will try to be glad, for Harry's sake, that it finally seems to be working.

After flying lessons, they meander back up to the castle for dinner in a great unwieldy clump.

“Our first flying lesson, and you hardly got to fly,” Draco laments as Harry and Longbottom catch up with them from the stands.

“My fault,” starts Longbottom, but it looks like they’ve been having this conversation for a while because Harry shuts him up with a friendly elbow to the ribs.

“Shut it. I don’t mind. I still can’t believe Hooch didn’t come after you herself. Isn’t that what she’s here for?”

“I wonder if the wizarding world is less concerned about physical injuries since they’re so easily mended,” ventures Granger. “I mean, they can heal cuts, regrow bones, and reverse all sorts of things with the right potion. But it doesn’t mean it’s pleasant to get hurt.”

“The cure isn’t all that pleasant, either,” says Weasley. “I broke my ankle once when my brothers dared me to jump out of a tree. The bone was poking out of my skin—” Longbottom turns a bit green at this, “—so the Healers said it was easier to Vanish the broken bone and regrow a healthy one from scratch. Skele-Gro hurts like a bugger, I’ll tell you that.”

“Three cheers to Harry for saving me from *that,* ” Longbottom says faintly.

“Next time won’t be so bad. I can hold on before you kick off, if you like, and only let go when you feel like you can manage it,” offers Harry.

Draco feels another surge of irrational jealousy. Apparently, all it takes to keep Harry’s attention is to be a useless oaf who can’t do anything by himself.

As they walk, Harry asks Weasley questions about his brothers. For some reason, Harry seems determined to draw him out, and it finally seems to be working, now that he’s played the hero with Longbottom. By the time they reach the castle, Draco knows more about the innumerable Weasleys than he ever needed to.

The oldest brother is a Curse-breaker for Gringotts, and the next rides dragons in Romania, or something romantic like that. Draco is

surprised and uncomfortable to recognize in Weasley's tone something similar to Draco's own feelings when passing the long line of ancestral Malfoy portraits at home in the Manor: a mixture of pride and insecurity, that fear that you might be the one to bugger it all up.

Against his will, Draco learns that the third Weasley brother is "a hopeless prat," which probably means he ended up with more sense than the others, and that the twins are a double terror to teachers and little siblings alike. There's a girl, too, who won't be at Hogwarts until next year. Draco wonders what sort of person she must be, with the weight of all this overwhelming Gryffindor loudness hanging over her.

Hopefully Harry doesn't insist on adopting her, too.

Just outside the Great Hall, their group is intercepted again by Flint, Pucey, and Bletchley. The Gryffindors falter.

"Don't you have better things to do with your time than stalk first years all over the castle, Flint?" says Harry, folding his arms. One hand disappears up the opposite sleeve, where Draco knows Harry's wand is holstered.

Again, Flint ignores Harry to glare down at Draco. "How much longer can this go on before word gets out you're a Blood Traitor, Malfoy?"

"He says that like it's a *bad* thing," mutters Weasley.

When Flint turns his scowl on the Gryffindors, Harry steps in front of them, telling them, "I'll catch you guys later." Weasley hesitates, but Granger drags him away with them to scurry off to dinner by another door.

"You ought to go with your pet Mudblood, Potter. This is between Malfoy and me."

"Come on, Flint," says Harry, "We both know your problem is really with me. Leave Draco out of it."

"Or better yet," Draco says, desperately trying to draw Flint's attention back to himself even though Harry seems spoiling for a

fight, “Bugger off.”

Flint’s ugly face turns uglier still as a pleased sneer contorts his features. “How do you think the Dark Lord will feel, Malfoy, when he returns to find the old families so…disloyal?”

“I hardly think the Dark Lord needs you to defend his honor, Flint,” says Harry.

“Against the likes of you?” Flint rounds on Harry. “That’s exactly what’s needed. You shove your way into *our* House, strutting around as if you have any right to, as if you belong here, when *you’re* the reason things are the way they are!”

In contrast to Flint’s furious gesturing, Harry is a study in stillness. “When the Dark Lord returns,” he says quietly, “he can deal with me himself. Until then, I suggest you back the bloody fuck off.”

“Ooh, the baby’s got a mouth on him,” says one of Flint’s friends. “Should we make him eat shit?”

“Hex him,” says the other. “Put him in his place.”

Flint stalks closer. Draco fights the instinct to step back, not wanting to leave Harry’s side.

“No,” Flint says thoughtfully. “Let’s give him a chance to back up his big boy talk. Midnight. The trophy room. If you’re not too much of a pussy to show up, Potter, I’ll hand you your arse in a genuine wizard’s duel.”

“As opposed to the great manhood it takes to challenge an eleven-year-old to a duel,” Draco can’t help but snap.

“It’d hardly be fair,” Harry agrees. There’s an edge to his voice that Draco can’t quite place. Amusement, almost, like he knows something Flint doesn’t.

“What are we, Gryffindors?” Flint laughs.

“I’ll make you a counteroffer,” says Harry.

“I don’t think you understand how this works,” Flint begins.

“You play Quidditch, right, Flint?” says Harry.

“Slytherin captain, what’s that got to do with—”

“Midnight tonight. The Quidditch pitch. If you’re not too much of a pussy to show up, I’ll hand you your arse in a Seeker’s match.”

Flint looks at Harry disbelievingly before bursting into mean laughter. “One flying lesson and he fancies himself a Seeker!” he howls. “You’re on, Potter. Bet I can still put you in the Hospital Wing.”

The three older boys shove past Harry and Draco, tossing taunts over their shoulders as they go.

Not looking where he’s going, Flint knocks into someone coming out of a side passage. “Oh, sorry, Professor Quirrell,” Draco hears him say before the boys disappear around a corner.

Harry, almost at the door to the Great Hall, hasn’t heard. “Coming, Draco?”

He hurries to catch up.

At quarter to midnight, Harry, Draco, Pansy, Blaise, Crabbe, Goyle, and a reluctant Theo sneak down to the Quidditch pitch, but not alone. Harry had told Granger about Flint’s challenge, and she’d told Longbottom, who’d told Weasley and Finnegan, and then half the first year Gryffindors insisted on coming along.

“I don’t mind if you come,” Harry had told Weasley, “but I need a favor.”

At Harry’s request, Weasley had gotten his troublemaker twin brothers to show the first years a secret way out of the castle so they could sneak out after curfew without getting caught. Harry made them all—even Draco—promise to run at the first sign of trouble.

“If Filch shows up, or any teacher, there’s no point in all of us going down for it at once,” he’d said.

While they wait for Flint, Harry breaks into the broom shed to borrow a decent school broom—Draco had thought he’d get his Nimbus 2000, but Harry said he didn’t want Flint to be able to blame the broom when he lost—and a tiny Golden Snitch, which he’s tossing up and catching as if it’s not the first time he’s ever touched one. It flashes in the white light of the half-moon.

“Will you be able to see it?” Weasley asks.

“It’s not much different from playing in a bad storm, I reckon,” says Harry.

“Wouldn’t recommend that as your first attempt at Quidditch, either,” says Finnegan. He’s the most ambivalent about Harry’s chances; it seems like he’s come down mostly for the thrill of the illicit adventure and doesn’t much care who’s trouncing who if he gets a good show out of it.

To help with visibility, Granger conjures bluebell flames to hover over the field. Most of it is still in shadow, but there are faint circles of light that might catch the Snitch if it passes them.

Flint and his friends roll onto the field at five minutes past midnight. A power play, Draco knows: the most important people are never first to arrive, whether it’s a ball or a duel.

It doesn’t seem to faze Harry. He holds his hand out. “Flint.”

Flint spits at the ground near Harry’s feet. “Potter.”

“Mount up, lads,” orders Pucey. “Malfoy, get to the stands.”

Draco makes a face at taking orders from the likes of Adrian Pucey, but he does as he’s asked so Harry can get to it. He sits down by Pansy just in time to see Pucey release the Snitch.

Pucey counts down from ten, but Flint kicks off before he’s even called two. Harry follows a second later, speeding high into the air like he’s been flying for half his life. Pucey and Bletchley find seats

somewhere far from the first years.

Harry and Flint circle the pitch from above, eyes scanning the darkness for a flash of gold.

When the Snitch finally puts in an appearance over by the goalposts, Harry is the first to spot it. He zooms after it, Flint hot on his heels. Flint slams into him, sending his broom careening toward a goalpost. Draco digs his nails into his palms.

Instead of fighting the roll of his broom, Harry leans into it, spinning all the way over twice and then pulling into a sharp corkscrew that takes him up and through the loop of the goal. The young Slytherins cheer, but the Snitch has disappeared again.

Flint is drawing lazy figure-eights over the pitch. Harry is hovering low under the goals, his eyes half closed. Draco realizes he's listening for the Snitch instead of watching. Suddenly, Harry is off like a shot to his right, skimming above the wall on the far side of the field. Flint barrels after him.

Draco sees a flash as the Snitch leads the boys first up, up, up above the towers and then down into a vertical dive. Again, Flint tries to slam into Harry, but Harry crouches low on his broom and twists away. It's a game of chicken now as they speed toward the ground, hands reaching for the tiny Snitch.

Flint's arms are longer, but Harry's nerve is stronger: Flint pulls out of the dive a split second before Harry, who sweeps up again with his hand raised triumphantly above his head.

All the first years cheer, even the Gryffindors. Flint is staring at Harry openmouthed. Harry wheels around to the stands, grinning, then drifts down to alight on the ground beside Flint.

Flint, who still looks more stunned than angry, is saying something to Harry, and now they're actually shaking hands. Draco has just stood up to go down and talk to Harry when he notices a dark figure striding onto the field. He grabs Pansy by the hand and hisses, "Get out, *now!* Professor sighted!"

They crouch down to quickly slink out of the stands. Draco can't see the field, but he hears Uncle Severus laying into Harry and Flint. Once they're clear of the stands, the first years sprint across the dark lawn toward the castle.

Suddenly, Granger trips on something and falls on her face. Pansy can't swerve around her in time, and she goes down too.

Draco stops to help untangle the girls, cursing his momentary lapse of selfishness. He sees the frontrunners already slipping through the hidden side door they'd used to sneak out of the castle earlier. "Come on, come on!" he urges the girls.

Uncle Severus must still have been yelling at Harry and Flint, because there's no pursuit from behind. Draco slips through the door, shutting it quietly after Granger and Pansy. There's no sign of the others; they must have already scattered to the dungeons and tower. Draco starts down the corridor.

When the corridor opens into the large entrance hall, Draco stops. He hears something. He holds out a hand to warn the girls.

Lantern-light bobs around a corner. In the still air of the great empty room, Draco hears a tiny meow.

"Mrs. Norris!" he breathes.

He thinks maybe they can just hide here until the cat and her master move on, but at that moment Peeves tears out of the wall right beside them and lets out an earsplitting giggle.

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED! STUDENTS OUT OF BED!"

They sprint across the hall, racing for the stairs. Draco looks over his shoulder and sees Filch emerge into the entrance hall. He's spotted them. Draco is about to step onto the staircase that leads down to the dungeons when Pansy yanks him back by the collar.

"You idiot! It's moved!"

Granger pulls them toward a different staircase. "Come on!" she hisses.

They race up the other staircase, bracing themselves when it starts turning in midair. The top of it now leads onto another staircase; they take that one too, leaping off onto a landing and tearing down an unfamiliar corridor. They hear Mrs. Norris yowling behind them, and Filch can't be far off.

The corridor dead ends in a locked door. Draco growls as he tries to force the handle.

"Honestly!" says Granger, pulling him away. *"Alohomora!"*

The lock clicks open. Granger, looking entirely too pleased with herself, pushes open the door. Draco and Pansy follow and slam the door behind them. Granger locks it again with a muttered spell.

They stand there silently panting until they hear Filch approach and leave again on the other side of the door. Then Draco sees it.

Just behind them are the three snarling, slavering faces of a massive three-headed dog.

"And then what did you do?"

They're back in the Slytherin dorms. All the boys are piled onto Draco and Harry's beds, huddled facing each other as if they're on huge canopied sofas. Draco is telling his story to the rapt audience of his dormmates, who'd all made it back without incident.

"We ran, obviously."

"But what is a Cerberus doing in Hogwarts?" says Theo.

"That was the forbidden third-floor corridor, wasn't it," says Harry quietly, letting Hildegard slither from one hand to the other.

"So it's forbidden because there's a giant man-eating dog stashed away in it?" says Crabbe with a frown.

"I think the real question is, what is so important that it has to be guarded by a giant man-eating dog?" says Draco. "It was standing on

a trapdoor."

"No, the real question is whether it has anything at all to do with us," says Blaise.

"I want to know what Snape said to Harry," says Goyle. "Just how fucked are you?"

"Detentions every Friday night through Christmas." Harry ducks his head and runs a hand through his hair. "And Flint asked him to put me on the Quidditch team."

Everyone starts talking at once.

"But they don't let first years play Quidditch!" says Draco.

"He's going to ask Dumbledore to make an exception for me, I guess. He saw that last dive and said, 'It would be a shame not to put that recklessness to a use that benefits more than just yourself, Mr. Potter.'"

Everyone loses it at Harry's uncannily accurate impersonation of Uncle Severus.

"So, you're good with Flint?" asks Goyle.

"I'm not sure. I think maybe he just cares more about Quidditch than loyalty tests."

"You think Dumbledore will let you play? He hates Slytherins," says Theo.

"He's still Harry Potter," Blaise points out.

Harry makes a face. "Yeah, I think Professor Snape is counting on the goodwill from, you know, all of that. Doesn't hurt to ask, anyway."

"The teachers all love you, too," says Draco. "And even the whole business with Flint was because you were being all—you know."

"Being all what?" says Crabbe.

Blaise makes his voice wobble like Dumbledore's: “The Champion of Muggleborns, Befriender of Blood Traitors, Ambassador Across the House Aisles—”

Harry throws a pillow at Blaise, shutting him up.

Hildegard hisses something, and Harry laughs. Sometimes, Draco swears it's almost like he understands her.

“Anyway, I'm knackered, and detentions start tomorrow. Get off, you lot.” Harry pushes at Goyle’s unyielding bulk with both of his feet until the other boy finally obliges with a loud sigh.

When everyone has cleared out to their own beds, Harry puts Hildegard back in her tank and climbs into bed.

Draco whispers goodnight across the short space between their beds.

“Goodnight, Draco,” comes the sleepy reply.

Harry was really something out there tonight. Draco can't wait until the whole school can see him.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Thanks for your patience as I worked on this alongside some other things these last few weeks! You may have noticed that there's a fourth work in this series now, The Brief Fiery Plummets. Each chapter in this work is a 100-word drabble that zooms in on a different high-drama point Harry might have jumped into after going back in time, instead of waking up in the hut by the sea. I hope you have a chance to check it out!
>
> For all my fellow multishippers, I also have a Drarry drabble series going this month, but this one is telling a sequential story in 100-word vignettes. Check out my profile to find that one too.

9. 9. A Catalog of Non-Definitive Acts

Summary for the Chapter:

> Conversations with Quirrellmort, Severus, and Scarcrux.

"So maybe I wanted to give you something more than a catalog
of non-definitive acts,
something other than the desperation."

-"Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out," Richard Siken

"You look like you could use this today." Quirrell takes the whistling kettle off the hob and pours two cups of steaming tea.

He's not exactly the flower of health himself, is he, says the Voldemort in Harry's head. It's true: Quirrell's hands are shaking slightly, and his voice sounds tired, even aside from the stammer he's barely bothering to put on for Harry anymore.

"It was a late night," says Harry, taking the tea gratefully.

"I heard. You were the talk of the staff table this morning."

Harry winces. "How bad was it?"

"Bad? I think Minerva wanted to drag the Hat out to have you re-Sorted on the spot. 'A Potter, playing for Slytherin!'"

Harry nearly spits out his tea when Quirrell's voice rises to mimic McGonagall's brogue. "I don't think she'd have much success, but I do appreciate her reminding Professor Snape why he shouldn't be *too* terribly furious with me."

"He was still quite angry, in that silent, tight-jawed way of his. But he was quick to set Minerva straight regarding your chances with the Sorting Hat."

“He didn’t think a midnight Seeker’s match and a fifty-meter dive for the Snitch made me too much a Gryffindor?”

“Not when he knew he might have been delivering what remained of you to the Hospital Wing after a wizard’s duel with a fifth year, had you not cunningly turned the challenge to something you had a prayer of surviving.”

“He said all that?”

“Not in so many words.” Quirrell’s eyes seem all the brighter for the deep shadows beneath them. “Marcus Flint should take care not to run his mouth where any passing professor might hear.”

Harry’s breath catches. “You heard us.”

“I heard enough.”

Harry stares into his tea, mind spinning through everything he can remember of yesterday’s confrontation outside the Great Hall. “Flint is loyal to what he knows. I can hardly fault him for that.”

Quirrell scoffs. “And what have the Flints done to come to their lord’s aid? What have your Malfoys done?”

“What have *I* done? I mean, I’m the whole reason…”

Quirrell lets Harry’s words hang in the air for a few seconds after he trails off. “The far more interesting question is, what *would* you do?”

As Harry holds his gaze, he could swear Qurirell’s eyes flash red for a split second. There is an answering throb in his scar.

Should we tell him that you would travel through time, treasuring the piece of his soul he abandoned to you, just for the chance to be near him again? hisses the horcrux.

Harry can’t stop the blood rushing to his cheeks. *I’m certainly not going to say it like that,* he thinks back.

Why not? It’s true.

It makes me sound infatuated, Harry thinks.

The answering silence is loud.

Quirrell cocks his head, still observing Harry sharply. “When the Dark Lord returns to *deal* with you, Potter, what will you do?”

Harry shivers involuntarily to hear his own words to Marcus Flint turned back on him now. He bites his lip. “Whatever he asks, I expect.”

Quirrell’s eyes flash red again. He leans forward slightly. “Will you really?”

Careful, warns the horcrux. *Don’t overcommit yourself before you know what he’s thinking.*

Harry shifts in his seat. “I mean, I won’t kill innocents for him.”

“What a fascinating qualification. Whom would you kill?”

“Well, if someone was trying to hurt me, I’d defend myself, wouldn’t I?”

“And if someone tried to hurt the Dark Lord?”

“I think Voldemort can take care of himself,” says Harry, noting the way Quirrell’s mouth almost twitches into a smile. “But…yeah. If you’re asking if I’d fight for him…I mean, I really hope there doesn’t have to be another war. I think if I help, there’s a chance we could avoid it.”

“I thought Voldemort didn’t need your help.”

“He doesn’t need my wand. My name might come in handy, though.”

Quirrell raises a brow. “You would support him publicly?”

“If he asked me to.”

“The Boy Who Lived…at the Dark Lord’s feet,” Quirrell muses, almost to himself. Harry closes his eyes at the image. After a second, Quirrell

asks, “Would you take his Mark?”

Harry looks down at his bare forearms, then back up at Quirrell. He is acutely aware of the scar on his forehead. “Hasn’t he already marked me?”

Quirrell inhales sharply. Harry sees his hand twitch as if it wants to reach out and touch, but then Quirrell collects himself and straightens in his seat.

“Do your housemates know the extent of your…sympathies?”

“I haven’t told them. They know I’m uncomfortable being the other side’s symbol for something I don’t even remember doing, but I think they probably see me as fairly neutral.”

“That is not how you see yourself?”

Harry pauses. “No, sir.”

Quirrell studies him for a minute, his expression unreadable. Harry wonders again if this is the right time to come clean about all his secrets. If Quirrell’s reactions are any indication of what Voldemort himself is thinking, he’s fascinated by Harry, at minimum. He seems pleased at the suggestion that Harry’s loyalty is his for the asking. But Harry still has no idea what the other man plans to do with him, or with the wider wizarding world.

Steady, counsels the horcrux. *We have time yet.*

The moment passes. Quirrell sets his tea things aside and draws his wand. “You sidestepped Flint’s challenge quite neatly. But I cannot help but think that not all your enemies will be so courteous as to offer you a formal duel, nor so naive as to accept a counteroffer.”

“You think that Voldemort’s sympathizers might start attacking me unprovoked?”

“I think you ought to be prepared to defend yourself in any number of unexpected circumstances. What do you think the Dark Lord would think if he returned to find you already dead at the end of Marcus Flint’s wand?”

“Flint and I will be fine.”

“That is not my point.”

Harry sighs. “I know. But the fact is that I don’t know what Voldemort would think. For all I know, he might just be angry someone else killed me before he could.”

“You don’t really believe that.”

He doesn’t. Not really. “I don’t know, though, do I? I don’t know if he still wants me dead, I don’t know if he wants a bloody war. I don’t know if the world he wants to build will have any room for my friends in it. I wish I could just ask him.”

Quirrell is silent for a beat. “I will not pretend to know the Dark Lord’s mind.”

I can’t imagine why he wouldn’t want to confide in such an impressive host, says the horcrux, and Harry presses his lips together to avoid smiling.

Be nice, Harry replies. *I like Quirrell.*

You like Voldemort, says the horcrux.

Quirrell continues, unaware of the conversation happening in Harry’s head. “But I imagine that he will want to discuss it with you directly. I would like to make sure that you survive long enough to get the chance.”

“Sir?”

“Tell me, Potter, did you read the book of offensive magic I bought you in Flourish & Blotts?”

“Of course.”

“Show me.”

“You want me to…hex you?”

“I want you to try.”

Harry’s heart rate picks up. He stands and draws his wand. Quirrell hasn’t really seen him cast with it yet—the first-year Defense lessons are still all theoretical, and Harry hasn’t had cause to use magic when he visits for tea. He wonders how Voldemort will feel about seeing Harry’s phoenix feather wand in action.

“Ready?” Harry asks, trying not to sound nervous.

“Don’t worry, Potter, you won’t touch me.” Quirrell looks amused. It makes Harry want to surprise him.

“Locomotor Wibbly!” Harry flicks the Jelly-Legs Jinx at his professor, who is still sitting motionless behind his desk.

Quirrell’s wand barely moves. The jinx bounces harmlessly off a nonverbal shield charm. “Good. Again.”

Harry tries a Stinging Hex next, followed by a Diffindo. Quirrell bats each aside effortlessly.

“Come on, Potter, you can do better than that.”

Harry knows he’s being baited. It’s working anyway. He wants to prove himself to Quirrell—to Voldemort. He’s not just Harry Potter, eleven-year-old legend, he is Harry Potter, who defeated a dark lord with a disarming charm.

Harry lobs several spells at Quirrell in quick succession. *“Titillando! Tarantallegra!”* They’re not meant to hit but to distract. *“Aqua Erecto!”* A jet of water streams from Harry’s wand, and while it doesn’t hit Quirrell behind his shield, it splashes onto a pile of books on the desk, drenching them.

Quirrell’s eyes only flit away for a second. It’s enough.

“Expelliarmus!” cries Harry, whipping his wand up sharply. Quirrell’s wand jerks out of his hand and shoots across the desk to smack into Harry’s open palm.

The rush and the rightness of it feels like catching the Snitch.

Quirrell is frozen. For a second, Harry sees something like fear flash across the man's face, before it smoothes away into mere slack-jawed disbelief. Then Quirrell masters even that, and he smiles tightly, an avid look in his eye.

"Well done, Potter. Impressive strategic thinking."

"Thank you, sir." Harry hands Quirrell's wand back. He thinks he sees the man's hand shaking as he takes it, but then Quirrell snaps a drying charm on the stack of wet books, and Harry wonders if he imagined it.

"Next time, you will defend. I suggest you practice your shield charms this week."

Harry nods. As he leaves Quirrell's office for the dorms, he marvels at the strange world he's walked into, where Lord Voldemort wants to duel him educationally instead of lethally.

What do you think he wants with me? he asks the horcrux.

It seems obvious he wants you for himself.

But he doesn't even know about you yet, says Harry.

And already he wants you to live. When will you tell him?

Harry tries not to shiver as the air changes down by the dungeons. *Soon. I promise.*

Potter arrives three minutes early for his first detention. Severus leaves him standing by the door while he finishes marking the fifth-year parchment he's been scowling down at for the last ten minutes. Finally, at precisely eight o'clock, Severus puts his quill down and looks up to scowl at Potter instead.

"Mr. Potter. How good of you to be so…punctual," Severus says, as if the boy had been late after all.

Potter tries to hide a smile at the insinuation, which is both charming

and obnoxious, depending on whether Severus decides to see more Lily or James in his young face.

“Put your things down. You will be scrubbing the N.E.W.T. students’ cauldrons tonight, as their time can be spent much better elsewhere.” As Potter discards his outer robes and draws his wand from its arm holster, Severus adds, “ *Without* magic.”

Potter looks up. “I was just getting it out of the way, sir.” He stows his wand in his back pocket, and Severus is hit with the memory of James Potter and his gang strutting around the castle, proud and careless in their Muggle clothes.

Potter drags the first heavy cauldron over to the sink and gets to work. The only sounds are the gentle splash of water and the clang of the cauldron against the sink.

“No complaints?” Severus says after a minute of unnerving quiet.

“What am I supposed to be complaining about?” asks Potter.

“Your classmates would have been informing me that they have no aptitude for such menial labor.”

Potter’s mouth twists bitterly. “Aunt Petunia made sure I knew my way around a pot.”

All of Severus’ thoughts grind to a halt on that casual revelation. He struggles not to let it show on his face. “Call my professional-grade cauldron a ‘pot’ again, Mr. Potter, and I will double your detentions.”

“Sorry, sir.”

Severus makes a valiant attempt to focus on his marking, but he can’t get Petunia Evans’ sharp face out of his head. “You were raised by your Muggle relations, then?”

Potter snorts. “If you could call it that.”

“What would you call it?”

“Housed, maybe.”

Severus frowns. “They mistreat you?”

“Ignore me, mostly. As long as I don’t cause them any trouble or draw attention to myself. You can imagine I haven’t always been great at that.”

Severus finds himself growing angry in a smoldering, protective way that feels decidedly uncomfortable. He shifts in his seat. “Elaborate.”

“Well, it was worse before I got a handle on my accidental magic. Not that I knew that’s what it was. I never knew about magic until I got my Hogwarts letter. And I never got my Hogwarts letter until Hagrid tracked us down and made the Dursleys let me read it.”

Severus files away the name for future reference. “How did they explain that scar on your forehead?”

“They said I got it in the car crash that killed my parents. Drunk driving, they said.”

Cold fury spills down Severus’ spine. To reduce Lily’s murder to drunk driving—it was unconscionable. A desecration. But he would expect nothing better of Petunia bloody Evans.

An unpleasant thought arises. Potter has seemed so savvy in his handling of the complex social hierarchies comprising Slytherin House that Severus may have taken Potter’s historical and political knowledge for granted. But is it possible that he’s been getting on so well with the Death Eaters’ children because he has no concept of them as such?

“Has anyone explained to you the true circumstances of your parents’ deaths?”

“Hagrid told me a little. But then I read everything I could get my hands on this summer. From…a variety of perspectives.”

Severus tries to envision the young Potter nose-deep in some unreadable pureblood propaganda. “Are you trying to tell me that you see both sides of your orphaning?”

Potter is quiet for half a minute as he sets the first cauldron aside to

dry and drags over another. “It sounds horrible when you say it like that. I’m just trying to understand, before I jump head first into my parents’ war like…like some kind of…”

“Gryffindor,” Severus supplies.

Potter seems to choke on a laugh. “Yeah. Like some kind of Gryffindor.”

“Try to remember that caution the next time you are tempted to taunt an older student into a midnight Quidditch match.”

Potter wrinkles his nose. “Would you have preferred a duel?”

“I would have preferred that you’d come to me, as your Head of House, if a student were harassing you.”

“Is that what you would have done, sir? When you were a student?” Potter looks over his shoulder at Severus with an expression of studied innocence.

Severus sees that face, that hair, those glasses laughing up at him as their spell dangles him upside-down for all the school to see. He sees himself putting all his rage into a new spell that will cut as deep as his resentment, scrawling *for enemies* next to the incantation. “Perhaps I expect you to be somewhat better than I have been, Mr. Potter,” he says quietly.

Potter rinses off his cauldron and fetches the next. “I’m not better than anyone,” he says into the mouth of it.

Is that what those Muggles taught him? Or is he saying something deeper about how he views the war and his place in history?

“If it happens again, you are to come to me first. This is not tattling in primary school. I am not head of Slytherin House for nothing. I would handle it with all the subtlety which the situation required.”

“I—thank you. I really don’t think it’ll happen again, but I appreciate it. I’ll try to remember I don’t have to fix everything myself.”

Potter sounds less than perfectly convincing, but Severus lets it slide.

“I spoke to the Headmaster today,” he says offhandedly.

“Oh?”

“He’s willing to make an exception allowing you to play Quidditch this year.”

Potter turns around, sopping sponge in hand. “It’s official?”

Severus bites down a smile. “I expect you to keep your grades up. Special privileges can always be revoked.”

“It won’t be a problem, sir.” For once, Potter sounds every bit the eleven-year-old boy Severus knows he is. “When do I start?”

“You’ll report to the pitch Monday at dawn. Don’t make me regret it.”

Potter whirls back around to grin into the cauldrons that he attacks with redoubled force. He works quietly for the rest of the hour, no doubt lost in juvenile fantasies of cheering crowds and Quidditch Cups. Severus smiles faintly at Potter’s back, telling himself he’s just pleased about the renewed prospects of the Slytherin Quidditch team.

It is a constant joy for Harry Potter’s Voldemort to spend the days in communion with his Harry. Sometimes they speak, in that lightning-fast exchange of words and impressions which may be enjoyed only by two souls so closely bound as they are. More often, Voldemort is content simply to watch and listen and feel, experiencing life alongside Harry from a position of most privileged intimacy.

Voldemort spends most of Harry’s first detention with Severus in this sort of quiet observation. He is glad for the uncomplicated happiness it brings Harry when Severus confirms that he’ll be playing Quidditch for Slytherin. Voldemort bears no great love for the sport, but a great deal for Harry. Despite his teasing, he has no intention of subsiding during the games the way he does when Harry wants privacy in the toilet. Voldemort intends to drink greedily of Harry’s adrenaline and fierce delight with a broom between his legs and a Snitch in his sight.

Once Severus has returned to his marking and Harry to his pots,

Voldemort tells him as much. *You are a marvel in the air. What an exquisite pleasure it will be to ride with you again to victory.*

Voldemort feels Harry's cheeks heat.

Why do even your compliments make you sound like a supervillain?

I cannot help that I am the product of a more eloquent time.

I mean, so was Hagrid. I think you're just a swot. Harry's mental voice is affectionate.

You do seem to attract capable minds with a tendency toward grandiosity, Voldemort rejoins, along with a mental image of Draco Malfoy and the Granger girl arguing the finer points of the Summoning charm in the library last week.

Harry is surprised, and then pleased, at the comparison. Voldemort catches his last thought more as a feeling than as words: *I'm so lucky to have you.*

After detention, Harry stops off at the library to return a few books. Granger's bushy head is bent over a table in the far corner, only just visible from the desk. A blonde head and a black can be seen opposite her: Malfoy and Parkinson.

What do you suppose that's about? Harry wonders.

Worried that they're getting along without you?

Is getting along what you'd call that? Harry glances dubiously at his friends' pinched faces as they stare down at something Granger seems to be sliding across the table to them.

Go over and see, Voldemort nudges him.

Harry does. "Hey, guys."

Granger jumps. "Harry!"

"How was detention?" asks the young Malfoy.

“Fine. He just had me scrubbing cauldrons.”

“Without magic?” Parkinson casts a scandalized look down at her elegant fingernails and gives an exaggerated shudder.

“It’s supposed to be a punishment,” says Granger. “Honestly, he got off easy. We all did. We could have been expelled for being on the grounds past curfew. I looked it up.”

“I’d hardly say we got off easy. We almost got eaten,” says Malfoy.

“Is that what you’re looking into? The dog?” Harry picks up the book that’s open to an image of a mean-looking hellhound with three heads.

Parkinson huffs. “Dog, he says. You didn’t see it, Harry.”

“The Cerberus, yes,” says Granger, taking the book back. “Ignore that picture, it was nothing like that. More like an overgrown mastiff. In triplicate.”

And you call me a swot, says Voldemort. *Who talks like that?*

You do, Harry replies, fighting back a smile. Aloud, he says, “What are you trying to find out?”

“What it’s doing there, of course!” says Granger.

“And that’s…going to be in a library book?” Harry says carefully.

“Well, not as such, but we might find out all sorts of other useful things. Like how to get past it.”

Harry turns an incredulous look on Granger. “You’re trying to get past it?”

Malfoy huffs. “Of course not, because *most* of us are not idiot Gryffindors with no bloody sense of self-preservation!”

He has no idea, Voldemort says wryly.

That was the old Harry. I love self-preservation! We are all about self-

preservation now! Case in point… "Are you sure that's smart?"

"I'm not planning a raid or anything," Granger protests. "I just think that everything is worth knowing, whether you do anything with the knowledge or not."

Smart girl.

"Be careful," Harry says. He looks over at the two Slytherins. "I'm surprised she's roped you into this."

Parkinson shrugs, exaggeratedly casual. "It is curious, isn't it? Do you think the Headmaster knows? If he does, what could he possibly be thinking?"

"And if not, who else could have put it there?" says Malfoy. His eyes betray the interest he's trying to keep out of his voice.

"I guess it never hurts to research," Harry says after a second. "Don't do anything stupid without me, okay?"

Granger beams up at him. "Want to join us?"

"Maybe next time. I've got to feed Hildegard tonight, and I'm getting pretty tired."

He is. It wasn't just the manual labor for Severus; Quirrell had worked Harry hard in their impromptu duel, as well, and it's starting to catch up with him. Harry's magic and mind might belong to a nineteen-year-old war hero, but his body is still just eleven.

"Let me know if you find anything," says Harry. His friends promise, and he takes his leave.

Back in the Slytherin common room, Crabbe and Goyle are hunched over a set of Gobstones with the same fierce concentration Granger had devoted to her text in the library. As Harry passes their corner, one of the stones explodes, forcing him to twist out of the way to protect his robes from the foul-smelling liquid.

"Alright, Harry?" says Crabbe, barely looking up.

Voldemort wants them to hex Crabbe for the near miss, but Harry just laughs. “No thanks to you!” he tells Crabbe.

“Early night?” Goyle asks.

“Yeah, I think I’m just going to feed the snake and then head to bed with a book.”

Crabbe makes a face that suggests he cannot imagine anything more tedious, but Goyle seems to brighten. “Can I do it?”

I don’t know, can *he read?* wonders Voldemort uncharitably.

Oh, hush, thinks Harry. To Goyle, he says, “You mean you want to give Hildegard her mouse?”

Goyle stands up, wiping a spare bit of Gobstone juice on his trousers. “Yeah, can I?”

“Sure, why not?” Harry leads the way into their dormitory. He sets his things down by his bed and walks over to Hildegard’s terrarium, given pride of place on a shared dresser.

“Hello, darling,” he coos, lifting her out of the tank. It’s fortunate that the snake understands English; Harry is hardly ever alone with her so as to speak her own tongue.

It doesn’t stop her from hissing back, of course, in sounds that no one else will recognize as speech. *Master, why do you starve me?*

It amuses Voldemort that the snake is always doubly dramatic when she knows Harry cannot respond to her directly.

Harry points Goyle to a small case beside Hildegard’s enclosure. “Open that and get a mouse out. You can levitate it if you don’t want to touch it.”

“I don’t mind.” Goyle reaches into the case to pull out one of the little mice sleeping under stasis charms, his pudgy fingers surprisingly gentle. “It’s warm,” he says in surprise.

“Yeah, they’re not dead, just sort of…stopped. Okay, set the mouse

on the floor. Now you just have to hit it with a *Finite* , and maybe a *Renervate* if that doesn't do the job."

"I don't know that second one."

"That's okay, I'll help if I need to."

He doesn't need to. When Goyle lifts the stasis charm, the mouse jumps awake and takes off running under one of the beds. Harry crouches down so Hildegard can speed off after it, hissing as she goes about the hunt.

They don't see her catch the mouse, but she must know she has an audience because she drags its limp body back into the middle of the floor before swallowing the thing. Goyle watches, transfixed, as she opens her jaw wide to work the mouse down her gullet.

By the time Harry finishes washing up for bed, there is a mouse-sized lump in the middle of the snake.

"That was wicked," says Goyle.

He'll make a decent Death Eater, observes Voldemort. *Quite bloodthirsty.*

Harry's mental cringe gives the impression of having wrinkled his nose. *Maybe we don't want to sort for bloodthirstiness anymore?*

Nonsense. You'll always need a few drones to do the dirty work.

Harry carefully picks up the snake and returns her to her enclosure. "Did you happen to see where she pounced?" he asks Goyle over his shoulder.

"I think it was under Blaise's bed."

Harry goes over to check. "Mind giving me a *Lumos?"*

Goyle shines his wand under the bed as Harry crouches down.

"Ah, here it is. *Evanesco.* " A flick of his wand vanishes the tiny mess the mouse made when it soiled itself in its death throes. Harry tries

not to think about this too hard. He is happy to provide for his snake; as soon as she'd expressed a preference for live prey, he'd ordered the case of mice under stasis. But Harry has little stomach for suffering, even when it's necessary. Even when it's just a mouse.

Voldemort finds this both exasperating and enchanting. *How do you expect to work with Voldemort if you cannot watch a mouse die?*

"I'm gonna go finish my game. Thanks, Harry."

Harry bids Goyle goodnight and climbs into bed before answering Voldemort's question.

Who says I can't handle it? I can't help feeling a little bad for it, but the mouse's death isn't pointless. I don't regret it.

Voldemort's presence in Harry's mind flashes warm as if in a hum. *Shall we inform the Dark Lord that you have no objection to a nice clean* Avada *when necessity requires?*

I'm not naive, Harry insists, drawing the curtains closed around his bed with a wave of his wand. *I know that people will die. But it doesn't have to be so many, or so senselessly.*

You could always try to force his hand. Go get the Stone yourself, or collect a few horcruxes and negotiate for them. This is a well-worn path of conversation for them. Voldemort knows what Harry's answer will be.

I don't want it to be like that.

There's no way to know what it will be like until you tell him.

Harry buries himself under the covers. *I know. Not yet.*

What are you waiting for, a sign?

Maybe so.

They find each other in their dreams, as always. Harry is lying on his

side in the same position he fell asleep in, with Voldemort facing him as if in a mirror. Their heads rest on folded hands and their bent knees only just touch.

They are nearly the same size, now, nineteen-year-old dream-Harry and the still-growing Voldemort. Voldemort knows his skin is smoother than when they first met in this dream version of the cupboard under the stairs—Harry remarked on it the last time. From what he can tell, the horcrux looks very much like a smaller version of the Voldemort who killed Harry's parents.

The cupboard, too, has grown. It still has the general shape of the little room under the stairs, sloped ceiling and all, but it's tall enough now that they could stand up if they wanted. The mattress on the floor has become a little bed: still too short for an adult man to stretch out on, but big enough for the two of them if they curl into each other, as they always do.

Harry’s eyes open, gleaming green in the low light. Sometimes Voldemort wonders if it's because of his own bias that Harry is so pretty here in their dreams. Is it just that this is how Voldemort sees Harry in his mind? Or did he always look like this at nineteen?

“It's because I'm happy now,” Harry had told him the last time he tried to explain that Harry was actually glowing.

Voldemort had floated on the warmth of that knowledge for days.

That was the first time Voldemort held Harry here in their shared dream, instead of the other way round. They both prefer it this way, with Harry’s head lying on Voldemort’s chest and Voldemort’s arm around him. His Harry likes to be taken care of, and Voldemort loves nothing so much as being the one to take care of him.

Now, Voldemort rolls onto his back and throws open his arm in invitation. “What are you waiting for, a sign?”

Harry’s solemn expression melts into a fond smile that Voldemort feels in the skittering beat of his heart. “It helps to be sure of my reception,” Harry says, scooting over until his cheek is pressed to Voldemort’s heart. His limbs cling to Voldemort’s thin body like he’s

afraid Voldemort might disappear at any moment.

“You will always have me, Harry. No matter what happens with him,” Voldemort murmurs into Harry’s wild hair. He wraps an arm around Harry’s shoulders to pull him even closer against him.

“I know.” Harry nuzzles his face into the hollow under Voldemort’s collarbone. “It would have been worth it just for you. Coming back, I mean. The rest would be nice, but even if I’m not able to change anything else, it was worth it just to know you. To keep you.”

Voldemort tightens his hold on Harry. “Likewise, dear one. To know you is a reward in itself. And…my Harry, if my other self has any sense left in him at all, he’ll feel the same.”

Voldemort feels Harry smile against his chest. “I hope you’re right.”

“I usually am. I’m very clever, you know.”

“You really are. Whatever would I do without you?”

The briefest flash of unpleasant memory strikes Voldemort. “Drive yourself mad until Death himself shows up to stop your sulking with a handy bit of time travel?”

Harry huffs a laugh. “I suppose so.” He is quiet for another minute, and so still that Voldemort thinks he must have fallen asleep, but then his whisper breaks the silence of their dream one more time. “You know I love you, right?”

Voldemort’s heart freezes, then speeds up. “Oh, my sweet Harry. Soul of my soul. It is your love that feeds me day by day. It is the finest nectar in all the world, to make me not a god, but something almost human.” Voldemort buries a kiss in Harry’s hair. “But I do love to hear it.”

“Good.” Harry’s breath slows as he sinks into sleep. “Goodnight, Voldemort.”

“Sleep now, love.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you very much for your patience this month! I have started multitasking a bit more, so Do It Over updates might slow down to about once a month until after the holidays, but you'll see other things from me in the meantime.

I recently closed out the Broken Tomarrymort Telephone with a cracky little wedding fic. Next month, I'm writing a holiday gift fic with a requested pairing I've never written before, so keep an eye out for that if you're open to a spot of light multishipping!

Also if you want to hang out with me and lots of other very cool HP friends, my online home is the Magical Menagerie discord server co-run by my fabulous beta Chaos_Bear. (Sorry I keep ignoring all your comma fixes, darling!)